

# ALFRED HITCHCOCK's

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MYSTERY MAGAZINE



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THEY'RE  
SORRY

by Bob  
Tippee

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# EDITOR'S NOTES

## Season's Greetings from the staff of AHMM

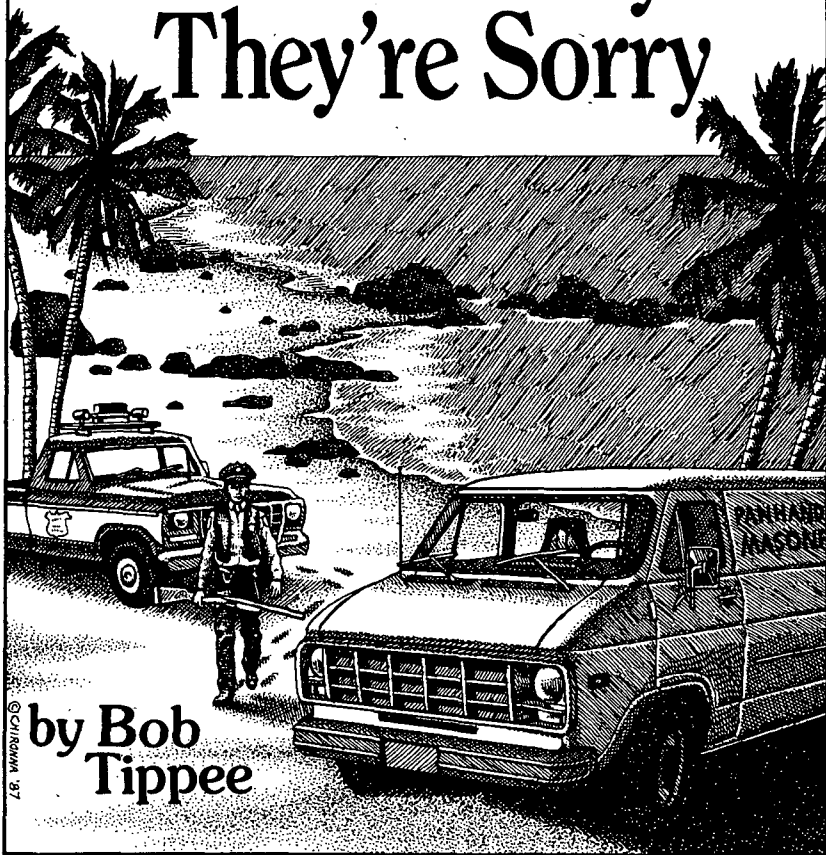


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# Friends Say They're Sorry



by Bob  
Tippee

“Dad, did Mr. Dexter kill Mom?” Rob Kettleman pulled Tommy’s Captain Defendo pajamas out of the drawer and stood up, wondering how to deal with this. Tommy was old

enough to be curious but too young to understand. Just be honest, he reminded himself.

“No. Mr. Dexter didn’t kill Mom.” He tossed the pajamas to Tommy. “Time to get into these, sport. What gave you

that idea about Mr. Dexter, anyway?"

Tommy began to undress. "I was telling Mr. Dexter about how we won't see Mom till we go to heaven. And he said he knew Mom died, and I told him everybody back in Tampa said she was killed. And he said he was sorry. If he didn't kill Mom, why did he say he was sorry?"

Because, Rob thought, it's what people say when they can't think of anything else. A beautiful young mother, running errands in broad daylight, walks into the wrong place in downtown Tampa when people she doesn't even know start shooting at one another. Drug wars. The mob. Nobody will ever be certain. Friends say they're sorry. What else can they say? How do you explain that to a five-year-old?

"I think Mr. Dexter just meant he knows how sad you and I are that Mom got killed and he wishes it hadn't happened."

God, let that be enough, Rob thought. Tommy's surviving parent had to be strong. But Tommy's surviving parent, the former big city police officer, kept wondering why things had turned out this way. Police officers died in the streets with bullets in their guts, not young mothers, not in broad daylight. Tommy's father understood little more than Tommy, but he had to pretend otherwise, and

the pretending hurt more all the time.

Please, he thought, no more questions. Not now.

Tommy pulled the pajama top down and stared at Captain Defendo's face painted brightly on the front. He smiled at Rob, struck a fighting pose, and in a forced, low voice snarled, "Captain Defendo!" Then he ran out of the room, fists high in the Captain Defendo Salute, and into the bathroom across the hall.

Rob sighed, off the hook for now.

By the time Tommy returned, Rob had turned off the overhead light and turned on the essential night lamp. Holding the covers open, he asked, "You like it here, don't you, sport?"

"It's okay," Tommy said, sliding into bed. "I just wish there were more kids around."

"What about your friends at preschool? And Mr. Dexter?"

"I'm showing Mr. Dexter how to throw a Frisbee."

That explained the upside-down Frisbee in the pond behind their condo. He would fish it out in the morning.

"Is he catching on?" Rob asked, pulling the covers up to Tommy's chin.

"No, but Mr. Sims is good."

"Mr. Sims?"

"You know. Mr. Dexter's friend."

"No, I didn't know."

"I think he lives in the condo next to Mr. Dexter. Sometimes he plays with us, and sometimes he sits up in his balcony and just watches."

"Is Mr. Sims nice?"

"Yes. He threw the Frisbee all the way from the picnic tables to Mr. Dexter's porch. And he has a gun just like yours."

Rob chilled. A stranger with a gun? He'd have to talk to Dexter, who so gratefully had solved Rob's main problem in becoming the Palm Shores security director: How to make certain that Tommy, already half way toward being an orphan, never felt alone, never came home to an empty condo.

"What would you think if we got Mrs. Darlington to be here afternoons when you got back from preschool?" Rob asked casually, wondering how he'd pay for the babysitter full time. Her rates had eaten up most of his salary when they moved in that first month, even with the free rent that came with his compensation package.

Tommy shrugged. "It's okay," he said. "She'll let me play with Mr. Dexter and Mr. Sims."

So there would be conditions. Rob decided not to pursue the subject until after he had talked with Dexter the next morning. "Goodnight, sport," he said, kissing Tommy's forehead and rising from the bed.

"Goodnight." When Rob reached the door Tommy asked, "Dad, when will you and me go to heaven?"

**T**he next morning, Rob steered out of the condo parking lot in his patrol unit—a compact pickup truck with emergency lights, a one-channel radio and portable side unit, and a shotgun behind the seat. It wasn't much, but he'd have traded it for more people. He had two patrol officers and two security gate guards per shift. For a fifty square mile resort with a championship golf course at each end, fifteen miles of shoreline, one luxury hotel, a marina, and a thousand condominium and single-family units, a staff that size didn't even amount to bluff.

Rob unhooked the radio's heavy mike and pressed the key. "Unit One to Base. Morning, Rose."

He didn't have a dispatcher. He had a rental-office clerk who monitored the base unit, kept logs, and took shift reports for an extra fifty dollars a month. At least she was efficient. "Welcome to the world, chief. How's things?"

It wasn't Rose's concern that neither Dexter nor Sims had been in their condos after Tommy left in the preschool van.

"I didn't get any calls from

the graveyard shift," he said. "I assume it was quiet."

"Routine," Rose said. "A couple of loud parties in Bay Towers. Kids diving for golf balls in a water hazard. Nights are pretty quiet here."

"Ten-four."

A male voice crackled into the conversation. "I love that real police talk!"

"Good morning, Buster," Rob said. Buster Thompson, retired from Miami PD, could have handled the Palm Shores chief's position if he had wanted it and the board of directors hadn't insisted on a younger man. "What's your twenty?"

"There he goes again, Rose," Buster joked.

"He means where are you?" she said.

"The hotel. Gate check complete. Day shift guards at both."

"Ten-four," Rob said reflexively, regretting the real cop talk immediately. "That was for you, Buster. I'm at the curve around the Sands course. Rose, if you don't need me in the office for anything I'll head to the yacht club."

"Nothing here, chief. Looks like another boring day."

"That's how these retired folks and vacationers like it," Rob said. "Quiet and safe. Which is why we're paid our fabulous salaries. Unit One out."

Rob wanted to head to the yacht club because of the pay

phone at the marina. He could call Dexter from there. Rose could have patched his radio to a phone line, but the problem with Dexter wouldn't have stayed private.

Pulling into the yacht club parking lot, he glanced across the street at the tennis courts. On one was a tanned woman his age, wearing a short white tennis skirt and blouse and a blue visor. She had brown hair like Mary's. From here she looked like Mary.

Why did Mary have to die?

There he went, torturing himself again. He had done what he had to do: quit a dangerous job with Tampa PD and moved into something that, however boring, let him give Tommy the stability he lost when his mother was killed.

And now Dexter had screwed things up by letting this guy Sims flash a gun around.

Rob stopped in the alley overlooking the marina, with its white and blue yachts serene in their berths, a few people milling around. As he stepped out of the truck Charlie Ramsey called from the main gate guard shack.

"Got two guys here say they're supposed to do some cement work at the docks. It ain't on the schedule."

"Do they have a work order?" Rob asked.

"Yeah, but like I said it ain't



anywhere on the schedule."

The job schedule was Rob's idea, a way to keep track of people inside the resort other than regular workers, residents, and guests. Not everyone was remembering to list their jobs yet, but Charlie enforced the system as if it had been in place for years.

"I'm outside the marina," Rob said. "Be there in five."

He could call Dexter from the guard shack as easily as he could from the marina.

They were young men with tans, wearing bluejeans and workshirts. Magnetic signs on their van said PANHANDLE MASONRY.

And they had a work order.

"Signed by Mr. Davis himself," Rob said, recognizing the signature of the resort owner.

"I called Mr. Davis's office," Charlie said. "He's out of town till next week."

"You did just right," Rob said. "Mr. Davis is in Atlanta for a resort owners' convention."

Rob leaned out of the guard shack, handed the work order through the van window, and gave the driver directions to the yacht club.

"Thank you, sir," said the driver. Charlie raised the guard barrier.

"Sorry you had to come all the way out," the big guard said.

"I need to make a call anyway," Rob said, reaching for the wall phone. No one answered at Dexter's condo.

Back in the truck, Rob let his worries lead him in the direction of his new home, past the tennis courts and yacht club and toward the Sands golf course near his condo. As he made the big curve around the sixteenth green and seventeenth tee he saw the Panhandle Masonry van on the other side.

Rob turned on the emergency lights and stood on the accelerator. He caught the van within sight of his condo.

"I guess I didn't pay good enough attention to your directions," the young driver said sheepishly.

"Sign back at the cart crossing says 'Residents Only,'" Rob said coarsely.

The driver shrugged and looked at his companion, who said, "We just never seen a place like this before, officer. Damn; it's got everything!"

"Your turnoff's a mile back," Rob said. Newcomers often strayed into the restricted residential area, overwhelmed by the expanse and variety of this beautiful place. It did no harm to let them know that strict security rules came with the white sand and palms.

"This time watch for the grey condos on your right," Rob said. "The yacht club parking lot will

be right after that. Stay to the right of the clubhouse; the marina's straight behind. Turn around in this next parking lot."

As he pointed to his condo's parking lot he saw them: Dexter's Chevrolet and a Plymouth in the space that went with what must have been Sims's place. He followed the van into the parking lot and pulled into his own space next to Dexter's.

He found his neighbor and another man, obviously Sims, on the second floor balcony of the condo next to Dexter's, two units down from his own.

"What a pleasant surprise!" Dexter called down. As usual, he wore slacks and a collared blue T-shirt contrasting with thick, silver hair. "This is Dave Sims. You're just in time for iced tea."

The men disappeared inside the upstairs room. In a minute Dexter drew aside the drapes of the sliding glass patio door and beckoned Rob inside. He pointed to a chair by the butcher block dining table in front of the door overlooking the pond.

Sims came out of the kitchen with iced tea glasses. He was younger than Rob had expected, maybe forty-five, bald, rangy, dressed in sports clothes like Dexter's. Handing Rob an icy glass, he said, "Sorry, instant's all I got."

Rob didn't feel like pleasan-

tries. He looked at Sims. "Tommy mentioned something about a gun."

Dexter snapped his head toward his neighbor, who said, "I didn't know he'd seen it. I tried to be careful. It won't happen again."

"You're right about that," Rob said. "I'm going to hire a real babysitter."

Dexter looked back at Rob with sad eyes. "But I told you I'd be here every afternoon, and I have been. He's the one thing I have to look forward to each day." Rob knew Dexter liked their arrangement as well as Tommy did.

"Tommy sees enough guns with his father being a cop. After what happened to his mother, I'm afraid he's . . . well, fragile."

Dexter clenched his fist and looked down. "I understand your concern. But Dave can be more careful."

Rob squared around at Sims. "About the gun. I'm listening."

Sims folded his arms. "I have a permit."

"And a reason to have a firearm where a kid can see it, I suppose."

Sims nodded.

"I'm still listening," Rob said.

"It's part of my job. That's all I can say."

Rob slammed the table with his palm. "Damn it! I'm security director of this place, and

I want to know why the heat. Now."

Sims stayed calm. "You can write my superiors."

Dexter interrupted. "I'll explain everything."

He leaned forward and held his head in his hands, speaking slowly, painfully. Sims, he explained, was a federal agent guarding a witness in congressional anti-crime hearings starting the next month. Dexter had agreed to testify in return for protection and immunity.

"Immunity?" Rob asked.

"I had a flying service in Biloxi," Dexter said. "Some people—bad people—came to me when they needed secret transportation up and down the coast."

"The mob."

"I'm not sure."

"But you knew they weren't going to Sunday school."

Dexter nodded. "They lent me the money to get started in Biloxi. I didn't know who they were then. I didn't know until I'd been flying them around for a long time. Then it was too late. They'd have killed me if I tried to sell out. My wife didn't even know. I kept going to protect her, our livelihood, myself. She died a couple of years ago. I started looking for some way to break free. Then I heard about these hearings and got in touch with some people in the

government. They promised to hide me so I could do what was right."

Sims softened his tone, but he obviously didn't like this divulgence to someone he no doubt regarded as an amateur. "Now you know. Alan knows a lot: where key people went at important times. He'll be a valuable witness."

A sweat broke out on Rob's neck. "And he's like a neon bull's-eye until then. What in hell were you doing babysitting an innocent little boy?"

Dexter winced. "Joan—my wife—and I, we wanted kids. We wanted kids bad. It never worked out."

Sims had stiffened again. "We have people on the outside. I have no reason to believe Alan's enemies know he's anywhere in the state. Your boy's safer with Alan and me than he could be anywhere, especially if you do your job and watch the gates."

Rob stood up. "Don't worry about me and my job," he snapped. "Dexter, do you realize the people you flew around may have been the same scum that killed my wife?"

Tears filled the old man's eyes. "It couldn't have been," he said, his voice constricted. "The people in Biloxi never went east of Mobile. And the tragedy with your wife was... well, too clumsy. There's no connection."

"They're all the same to me,"

Rob said, standing up. "Thanks for the tea. And stay the hell away from my son."

**T**wo nights later, Rob took Tommy to his favorite drive-in restaurant for hamburgers. When they were finished, he said, "This arrangement we've had the last couple of days—me picking you up at school and taking you on patrol until the shift ends—how would you like to make that sort of an everyday thing?"

Tommy sucked the last of his milkshake through the straw. "I thought you said Mrs. Darlington was going to be there so I could still play with Mr. Dexter and Mr. Sims."

How did someone so young remember so much? "That's the problem, sport. Mrs. Darlington got another job, so she can't help us out like she did before."

"I thought kids couldn't go on patrol," Tommy said seriously. Had Rob told him that?

"They can't unless it's the boss's kid. I'm the boss."

Tommy looked at the lights and buttons on the patrol unit's dashboard in front of him. "I think I like throwing Frisbee with Mr. Sims and Mr. Dexter better."

"But I don't think it's such a good thing for you to play Frisbee with people who carry guns. I'm going to have a talk with Mr. Davis and see if we can

move, maybe into the Towers. We'll find somebody even nicer than Mr. Dexter."

Davis, Rob knew, would object. But he'd either go along or find himself a new security director. And Tommy would have to put up with his father. The boy didn't protest, but he didn't make it easy, either.

"You carry a gun, and we play Frisbee all the time," he said. "What makes Mr. Sims any different?"

**I**t wouldn't work. Rob had too many responsibilities. He found himself cutting too many corners in order to get to school to pick up Tommy. He had to excuse himself from too many appointments, then break the speed limits he was supposed to enforce.

He couldn't be Tommy Kettleman's father—determined that this hurt little boy would never feel alone—and Palm Shores security director, too. He would find another job, something more flexible, less responsible if need be, something that would enable him to live up to the responsibility that mattered.

But he didn't have time. He didn't even have a week. The first call from Rose came by phone to Rob's condo right after Tommy left for school the next Monday.

"Problems in Pine Estates,"

Rose said sternly, referring to the single-family homes overlooking the bay. "Sounds like a break-in at 2412."

"Keep the graveyard gate guards on station," Rob said. "Tell Buster to ask them about suspicious vehicles. Then call the sheriff's office. I'll meet them at Pine Estates."

A fat, greyhaired woman with wild eyes and a yappy toy poodle under her arm met Rob at the front door.

"I think it's a fine thing when somebody can just walk around a neighborhood like this and break into whatever house he chooses. A fine thing."

"What's missing, ma'am?" Rob asked.

"A TV set and a stereo. A very expensive stereo. I thought we had a security department."

The break-in was simple enough: A door on the bay side had been kicked in, the television and stereo carted outside from a family room, probably to a vehicle parked out front. There were no obvious prints. Rob managed to learn between the woman's complaints that her semi-retired husband traveled a lot; she had spent the night with friends.

Rob was briefing a young, aloof deputy when Rose's second call came in on the portable radio.

"Bad news, chief. Another

break-in. Tennis condos, Number 20."

Buster reported from the front gate that there had been no suspicious entries or exits during the night.

"Attention, all units," Rob said. "Restricted access effective until further notice. Rose, notify the county of this new problem and see if they can send more backup. I'm on my way. Buster, start patrolling the perimeter road. Rose, better see if you can raise Mr. Davis in Atlanta. Unit One out."

**R**ose patched Davis's call through to Rob shortly after noon as he worked the third burglary call of the day.

"Hell of a thing," Davis said. "I've been listening to presentations on resort security here. I could have stayed home and got the real thing."

Rob couldn't resist. "Did the experts there say anything about letting your security director know you've got hot federal property on ice?"

Davis cleared his throat. "I suppose I should have said something."

"Would've been nice, seeing as how the federal property and I are neighbors."

"There was a session on providing protection, as a matter of fact," Davis said coldly. "Not much about burglaries, though.



I think most people here think prevention is the key in that regard."

Davis had this way of reminding his employees who worked for whom. "Yeah," Rob said. "I'm at Number 3, in the Towers. And there's another I haven't got to yet in the flats by the Sea Breeze course. Buster's working that one and trying to keep an eye on the perimeter road all at once. We've got three county units, too."

Davis said nothing for a few seconds, then, "I'll be there in two hours. And, Rob, what I said about prevention: I know you're understaffed. You're doing your best, and it sounds like you've got it under control. I appreciate that. We'll talk about staffing later."

"Yeah," Rob said, exasperated, "let's talk."

Rose disconnected the telephone patch and asked, "Now that you've told off the boss, will there be anything else?"

Rob looked at his watch. There was no way he'd be able to pick up Tommy. "Patch me through to Alan Dexter. His number's on a pad on my desk."

**L**ate that afternoon Rose called as Rob, in the studio unit where the fourth break-in call had originated, checked factors with the deputy in charge of the investigations.

"Got a call from the Sea Breeze clubhouse. A couple of golfers had to play around a red van parked on the beach by the fourteenth fairway."

"Any marks?" Rob asked anxiously.

"Something about masonry. That's all they remembered."

"That's it," Rob said. "Attention all units. Suspects are two white males, late twenties, both tan, athletic, one with medium-length blond hair, the other with dark brown hair, shaggy-looking. Charlie, check the work roster. Buster, stay on the perimeter road. I've got a feeling they'll be trying to leave that way on foot. I'll check the van."

Rob clicked off his radio and nodded to the deputy as he ran out to the truck. Charlie called as he was pulling away.

"No checkout for the guys from Panhandle Masonry last night, chief," he said.

"Ten-four. Unit One's en route to suspect van, code one." Maybe the city cop talk sounded dense in this operation. But for the first time since Mary got killed, he felt his professional instincts coming alive. Even his differences with Dexter seemed secondary now.

Tommy, he knew, was in good hands. There was a job to be done, action at last. Exhilaration, accomplishment. Something to focus a person's thoughts.

Screw them if they don't like real police talk.

In Tampa he'd have had back-up. Here, he had himself, his wits, his .38.

He approached the van carefully, stepping over scrubby beach plants just off the fairway. Nothing moved.

He checked the cab first. Empty. The rear door wasn't locked. Inside was what looked like everything the burglary victims had reported missing.

"Unit One to Base," he said into the pocket radio when he was certain the burglars were nowhere nearby. "I've got the goods but no suspects."

"This is Davis," the resort owner called. "That's great news about the property. I'm at Base with Rose. How soon can you get here?"

"I've got a better idea," Rob said. "Why don't you head this way? My people and the county guys are busy, and I need somebody to stand by this vehicle. We can talk when you get here."

Rob searched the beach, heavily tracked by golfers, and found nothing useful. The burglars might have escaped the resort by a stashed or waiting boat. But why hadn't they taken the stolen goods? More likely, they had panicked for some reason, abandoning the van, fleeing on foot, heading for the perimeter road, the only way out. He could still catch them.

"Unit Two," Rob said into the radio after returning to his pickup next to the van, "sweep the whole perimeter road. I expect they'll break for the outside after it gets dark."

Rob glanced at the orange sky over the bay. It wouldn't be long. He also saw Davis's golf cart come over the rise behind the fourteenth tee.

"Rose," he said, "patch me through to Alan Dexter's apartment."

Sims answered. "Tommy wanted to watch boats, so Alan took him to the marina. They'll be back before dark. Alan's having more fun than your boy is."

Rob quickly described his day and said he'd probably be late. Sims wanted to know if any of the burglaries had been close to the Sands condos.

"Everything's been by the Sea Breeze course, so it couldn't be any farther from you," Rob said reassuringly. "My boss just got here. Thanks for the help."

Davis wore checked grey golf slacks, a solid yellow knit shirt, and a perpetual tan. Rob showed him the stolen goods.

"Excellent work," Davis said. "To have recovered everything so quickly . . . I'm impressed."

"We still don't have the suspects," Rob said, knowing Davis cared less about justice than about returning the property to his residents. "I've got a ques-

tion. Your signature was on the work order the suspects used to get into the resort. Concrete work at the yacht club."

Davis shook his head. "Forgery," he said. "There's no concrete work going on there. I sign a thousand things a day. They could have got a sample anywhere."

The explanation made sense, but it didn't fit. Burglars smart enough to use a business's procedures against itself weren't the kind to panic and run for no reason. The contradiction was an annoyance, not worth mentioning.

Rob walked to his pickup and pulled the shotgun from behind the seat. "I'm going to leave this and the portable radio with you and help out at the perimeter road. Hope you don't mind playing deputy for a while."

Davis took the weapon. "The stuff in this van is going to help me calm down some of my best residents. I'll guard it like the significant amount of money it represents. And, for your information, one of the things I learned at the security seminar in Atlanta was that yes, the local security people should be notified when there's a protection operation on the premises."

That this could be anything other than common sense surprised Rob, but something else bothered him more. "They had

a seminar on federal cover?"

Davis shrugged. "It's more common at places like this than you think. I'm new at it myself."

Rob slid into the seat of his pickup. The image seemed almost comic: resort owners—businessmen in designer sports clothes—talking about dangerous cover procedures at a convention. But he had other things to worry about.

"Keep your eyes open," he said. Then he picked up the radio mike. "Unit One's en route to the front gate. Rose, patch me to Dexter's condo again."

As Rob drove along the dark service road between the Sea Breeze course and hotel grounds, Tommy answered the telephone.

"Everything all right there, sport?" Rob asked.

"Mr. Dexter bought a Frisbee that glows in the dark," the boy said. "Mr. Sims and I are going to try it out right now."

"Be careful of the pond," Rob said. But he could hear Tommy's anxious footsteps already slapping against the kitchen floor.

"We turned on the floodlights out back." It was Dexter. "Dave'll be careful. I'm frying burgers."

It was funny, Rob thought, how the excitement of real police work changed his perspective. Dexter now looked like a

victim of the mob, not a willing member. That put him on the side of Rob and Tommy.

"I was wrong about you," Rob said.

"Does that mean—?"

"We'll talk about it. I'm sorry."

"Don't be. You were protecting your son. Maybe you overdid it. He's a tough kid."

Tough? How could Tommy be tough when Rob himself still felt like an open wound. Until tonight. Until this thing with the burglars. Maybe that was it: Now he felt "tough" again, part of the world.

"Like I said, we'll talk," Rob said. "And thanks."

He steered onto the road between the hotel and one of the Sea Breeze fairways. Looking back, he could see lights from the patrol units dancing on the perimeter road on the other side of the course.

In a minute he was on the palm-lined exit road with the front gate straight ahead. The radio crackled on.

"Unit Two's got two . . . no, three suspects on the tenth fairway. On foot, running south toward the tee box."

Rob turned on his emergency lights and sped toward the gate. "Unit One's turning north onto the perimeter road from the front gate. You can follow the suspects on foot, Buster. Anybody between the front gate and tenth fairway?"

A deputy called from closer to the tee box. The fairway ran between the perimeter road and a long lagoon. The trap seemed perfect.

Buster and the deputy were putting handcuffs on three men when Rob pulled up. And Rose called.

"A guy named Sims is on the line for you, chief. Says it's urgent."

"Put him on."

Rob waited a few seconds. "Rose?"

"He was there a minute ago," she said.

"If he comes back have him hold. I'll be right back."

What could Sims want? Rob hurried to the tee box. Buster turned his flashlight onto the faces of the suspects, who squinted and looked frightened.

They were teenagers, not the men who had driven the Panhandle Masonry truck.

"I'm going to ask once, and if I find out you lied I'll skin you kids myself," Rob said, fighting sudden desperation. "What were you doing?"

All three kids started to answer.

"You," Rob said, pointing to the one who looked oldest.

"Honest, officer, we were just diving for golf balls in the lagoon."

Buster stepped toward the kid. "Don't you know what swims around in there?"

Rob stopped the big officer with the back of his hand. "Never mind. How'd you get here?"

"The car's on the other side of that road."

Rob grabbed Buster by the arm and turned away from the kids. "Check out the car. If it's where they say, let the kids go and stay on the road but don't leave your radio."

"But—"

"These aren't the burglars," Rob snapped. "Something's very wrong. I'm headed for my condo."

**S**ims was on his hands and knees, shaking his head, when Rob ran into Dexter's condo.

"Where's Tommy?" Rob asked.

"They want Dexter," Sims said.

"Where?"

Sims shook his head, confused and in pain. He had to reconstruct events from an obviously scrambled memory.

"Tommy and I... playing Frisbee out back. Some guys came around the building where Tommy was, pulled down on me with automatic weapons. I hit the ground, rolled out of light toward the pond. One of the guys yelled it wasn't Dexter. They grabbed Tommy. Said they'd let him go if I turned Dexter over to them in half an hour at the marina."

Rob dropped to his knees. "When was that?"

"Nine. Five after."

Rob looked at his watch. Nine twenty-five. He reached to his belt for the portable radio, which now was with Davis. He jumped to his feet.

Sims grabbed his leg. "You got to handle this right," he said, obviously forcing himself to make the point. "They already fooled me once, doubled back, slugged me while I was trying to call you, took Dexter, too."

"Did you see them?"

The agent shook his head. "Can they get out the gates?"

"Damn it," Rob yelled, "you said they were going to the marina."

"That's what they said. That's why I think they're trying to get off the resort by car."

"So you think they've got Tommy and Dexter, too, and don't intend to let either one of them go."

Sims sat up, held his head, and looked sadly at Rob. "They're pros," he said. "Make sure the gates are secure."

**"T**hey've got my son." Rob's voice cracked at that part of his radio orders.

He didn't bother with the wide loop around the Sands course; he drove across two fairways to save time.



Maybe Sims was right. Maybe the men had faked the story about the marina and were heading out by car. They certainly had proved themselves adept at diversionary tactics, which Rob now recognized the burglaries to be. He had kept Buster and the rest on station along the perimeter road and gates.

But he couldn't bet everything on Sims's hunch. Maybe there was a boat lying in the darkness off the marina, waiting to pick up the kidnappers ... or were they assassins? If they now had Dexter, why had they taken Tommy, too?

"Unit One's code one to the marina," he said hoarsely. "Out." And he switched off his radio.

Speeding out of the residential area, he thought of Davis, sitting out on the fairway, no doubt hearing all this, wondering what was going on, probably trying to call Rob's dead radio now. How would the resort owner react when Rob told him he had tipped off the mob to Dexter's whereabouts when he signed into the convention security seminar and asked questions about guarding federal witnesses?

It didn't matter. What mattered was what he found at the marina. And if he found nothing, did that mean Sims was right or that Rob was too late?

He turned off the truck's lights and pulled into the yacht club parking lot.

Stopping next to the club building, he saw it: a big cruiser, maybe forty feet, running lights off, slipping into the shadows, engine barely audible.

Rob turned on his radio. "Rose, call Harbor Patrol," he said, giving her a sketchy description of the vessel.

Then he pushed himself out of the truck and bounded onto the dock, knowing that the Harbor Patrol would never find the ship carrying away his son. The ship would hide in the dark vastness of the night sea, as its owners hid in the moral confusion of an uncertain people, evil guaranteed anonymity ... except when someone made a mistake.

Rob trotted down the dock, eyes trained on the disappearing ship, giving up. Dexter's body would turn up somewhere, a message. And Tommy? What did they want with Tommy, who, like his mother, just got in the way?

Was the little boy somewhere by the stern, looking back? Could he deal with this? Was he, as Dexter had said, "tougher" than Rob thought? Did his captors know he couldn't be left alone?

Rob heard sirens that didn't matter behind him. He tasted again the unfair poison of grief.

He burned in his rage. And he looked below at the dark water. Could he find comfort there?

"Tommy," Rob whispered, tears stinging his eyes. "Tommy," he yelled into the darkness. "Oh, God, Tommy!" "Captain Defendo!"

The affected, low voice came from the low deck of a sailing yacht behind him. Rob turned.

And he saw the tiny fists, the arms high in the Captain Defendo Salute, the beaming smile of his son standing up from play.

"Tommy!"

Rob jumped into the boat and pulled his son up in a joyful hug. "How long have you been here?"

The little boy pursed his lips and shrugged. "I don't know. Those men took me on a boat ride. I thought they were bad men at first because they had guns and took me away from Mr. Sims. But they said Mr. Dexter would be there and everything would be all right, so I just waited, and sure enough Mr. Dexter came a little while ago. He talked with the men, and they put me in that boat, and Mr. Dexter said he was

going for a boat ride but you'd be along. And here you are."

This didn't make sense. "Tell me again: Mr. Dexter wasn't with you when you left the condo?"

Tommy shook his head. "I was real scared until he came."

So Dexter had clubbed Sims, knowing the agent would have resisted his surrendering in return for Tommy's freedom.

Rob set his son back down on the deck. "Weren't you afraid out here all by yourself?"

Tommy raised his fists again. "Captain Defendo likes boats," he said. "Besides, Mr. Dexter said you'd be here. And you know what else?"

Rob lifted his son, his tough little boy, onto the dock.

"No. What else?"

"He said to tell you he was sorry about Mom. I still don't know why he says that, but he didn't kill Mom."

Rob climbed out of the yacht. "You're right: He didn't kill Mom. Let's go home."

"Dad?"

"Yes, sport?"

"How come we're not waiting for Mr. Dexter to come back from his boat ride?"

FICTION

# Family Rates Available



by John H. Dirckx

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I keep my conscience in an old cigar box in the bottom drawer of my desk. That way I can get at it when I want it, but it doesn't get in my way when I don't want it.

For years I ran a pawn shop. Besides selling articles acquired in the normal course of business, I did a comfortable trade in stolen merchandise. I wasn't a fence. I never knowingly bought hot merchandise from a thief in my life. If you're as astute as you think you are, you've already figured out that I'm a thief myself. Or was, until my big windfall. That was where having a flexible conscience really paid off.

I had a simple, foolproof system of acquiring electronic equipment and jewelry for nothing and keeping it on ice for two years before marketing it. I don't want to talk about that. This isn't an autobiography, just the story of my last heist—the one that made it possible for me to relocate in the tropics and live like a retired dentist.

It was just after sunset on a foggy, sultry September evening when I parked my van on Teagarden Street, right around the corner from the Ashloe residence. The house faced on a cul-de-sac and I didn't want any complications to arise when I was ready to leave.

I sat in the van absorbing atmosphere and memorizing topography while I waited for the shadows to congeal. Not that I hadn't sat there in another car at the same hour on previous evenings. All the houses thereabouts were big, solid-looking, and old. The lots were likewise big and the trees were likewise old. The whole neighborhood wore an air of drowsy respectability and prudently stashed cash.

Weedless lawns sprawled like velvet in the failing light. Chandeliers with cut-glass pendants blazed in vaulted dining rooms. Now and then an expensive sports car pulled into a driveway, restoring some battle-weary executive, financier, or plumbing contractor to the bosom of his family. Somewhere a piano was being played with more zeal than grace.

Traffic was thin on Teagarden Street. A Little League baseball team filed along the sidewalk, poking their boring, embryonic faces at me through the gloom. Once a flash of lightning lit up the landscape again for an instant, followed long after by a remote, dull thump of thunder like a trunk lid closing in an attic.

At seven o'clock I got out of the van, opened the rear door, and removed a clipboard and a bulky parcel wrapped in brown

paper. The box inside the wrapping was practically empty, but I don't think a chance passerby would have suspected that from the way I carried it. I'd been practicing.

I walked around the corner into the cul-de-sac and started up the stone steps that cut diagonally across the sloping lawn toward the Ashloe house. Half-way up the steps I paused in the shadow of some willows to listen to a noisy dialogue trailing out of an open window somewhere on the ground floor.

"You said you didn't want it." A middle-aged man, peevish by nature and just now belligerent.

"I never said anything about it, one way or the other." A middle-aged woman, waspish by nature and just now incensed.

"I asked you at least five times—"

"Probably ten times. I never said I didn't want it. I said I wanted to think about it for a while."

"Well, that's not saying 'yes,' is it?"

"But why couldn't you have waited till I talked to—"

"No, but *listen* to me. Did you ever *once* say, 'Yes, I want it?'"

I moved out of the shadow of the trees and climbed the remaining steps to the deeper shadow of the porch. I could smell recent cooking there,

something with oil and herbs, and the voices of the debaters came clearer than ever. The session closed abruptly when I rang the bell.

After a moment the porch light came on and tired eyes inspected me without much curiosity through the window in the door. I squared up my face with the window, making sure my cap was visible from inside, and said, "Delivery" loud enough to be heard by the neighbors. The door swung open.

I hate people who are taller than I am. Especially women. She was the archetypal untamed shrew—self-centered, supercilious, and permanently indignant.

"What is it?"

"Delivery, ma'am. Sign here, please."

She scowled at the clipboard, reached for the pen I offered her, changed her mind, fumbled in her jacket pocket for glasses. The diamond ring on her finger was old, probably older than she was. I would have given her eight hundred tops for it at the shop. I could have sold it for thirty-five hundred.

While she was putting her glasses on, I moved into the foyer and set the parcel down on the floor. Under cover of the clipboard I slipped an automatic out of my belt so that, by



the time she could see it, it was pointed straight at her liver. I shut the front door gently with my foot.

"What is it?" she asked again, stupidly.

"Well, it isn't a delivery," I said. Someone just around a corner was stirring coffee, clanking the sides of the cup with the spoon. "Get your husband in here."

"Tucker!" she called, on a note that a male seal might have found inviting.

"What is it?" came in an impatient rumble from around the corner. My arrival seemed to have drastically curtailed both of their vocabularies.

She smirked at something on the ceiling. "Come and see."

A chair scraped on ceramic tiles. A big man in his shirt-sleeves shuffled in and took it all in a glance. "We don't have any money in the house," he announced with finality. He had the poker face of a businessman who had spent his life talking to people just like himself, lying his way into lucrative deals and out of ugly messes.

"That's not what I heard. Let's all go into the living room. Keep away from the windows." She couldn't take her eyes off the automatic and he couldn't be bothered to look at it. They stood in the middle of the living room while I drew heavy drapes

and turned on a couple of lamps so I could see what they were up to.

"Sit down. Nobody else in the house, is there?"

We sat. The furniture was comfortable, expensive, not new.

"There's nobody here but us." Ashloe was talking, examining the palms of his hands. "And we haven't got anything worth stealing."

"Not true. I know about the coin collection. I'm here to get it."

Ashloe didn't flicker an eyelash but his wife twitched and squirmed as if I'd stepped on her big toe. "There isn't any coin collection here," she snapped. "It's at the bank."

"No, it isn't. It's in a big safe in the next room, and the key is on a chain around your husband's neck. Make it easy on yourselves. I don't want to hurt anybody, but I'm not leaving here without the coins. I've got all night, and I happen to know you're not expecting any visits or phone calls."

"How can you possibly know that?" She'd never needed assertiveness training. She probably wrote the leading textbook in the field. "My sister—"

"You haven't got a sister."

"Just shut up, will you, Ruth?" Ashloe shifted in his chair, eyeing me covertly as if he were pondering a deal and sizing up

my smarts. "Most of the coins *are* at the bank, mister. What's left isn't worth killing anybody for."

I was on the point of telling him I had no intention of killing anybody when I realized that that might considerably weaken my position. "Or being killed for, right?"

He conceded the point with a sideways twitch of the head but otherwise sat tight. His wife put her glasses away and fumed silently at him from across the room. I waited.

"You know," he said finally, "these are gold coins we're talking about. They won't work in a cigarette machine."

"I don't smoke."

"And no dealer will touch them unless you can show where you got them."

"There are dealers, and then there are dealers. If I can't unload them as coins, I know somebody who can turn them into ingots."

After that he suddenly quit talking. Anybody would have thought he was more outraged by the thought of my melting down his coins than by having me steal them from him in the first place.

Without turning my back on them I got the empty box from the foyer and took off the wrapping paper. It was a wooden case I'd had for years. A brand-

new typewriter had been packed in it along about 1935. They don't make them like that any more. I put the case down on the coffee table and lifted off the lid. From inside I took a coil of rope and tossed it across to Mrs. Ashloe.

"Tie his ankles together, and then tie them to the middle leg of the couch. Do it right the first time. There's two pieces of rope there. The other one is for his wrists."

She hesitated at least half a minute before picking up the rope and running it through her fingers. Then something clicked behind those hard eyes and she went to work with a will.

Ashloe snorted, started to say something, but didn't. She made a workmanlike job of it, square knots and all. Before she started on his wrists he got unsteadily to his feet for a moment, clutched at his throat, and then dropped back onto the couch like a puppet with the strings cut. If he was making a show of being sick, I wasn't buying it.

When she'd finished, I checked her knots before fishing inside Ashloe's collar for the chain with the key. It wasn't there. I tried his pockets. Nothing.

"Come on, folks. This won't get you anything but maybe some bruises. Where is it?"

She'd sat down again on the

far side of the room. I started toward her. Something in my look must have bothered her, because she blurted, "I don't *know* where he put it!" with the sincerity of panic.

"I'll bet *he* knows, though, doesn't he?" I put down my automatic on the coffee table, sat down next to it, and got her left hand in both of mine. The antique diamond ring wouldn't come off over her knuckle.

"I didn't bargain on this," I said, to Ashloe rather than to her. "Too bad it's so hard to get off." I was reaching for my pocket knife when she suddenly twisted forward and snatched at the automatic.

I don't hit women—not even gaunt, feisty ones that remind me of a third-grade teacher who hit me plenty of times with a solid brass ruler. But I put myself between her and that automatic so fast that I bounced her back into her seat.

After that I got a bit rattled. I kept the automatic in my right hand and used my left on the ring with a violence augmented by clumsiness and frustration. She whimpered twice and then howled, "Tucker!" in an unmistakable tone of reproach.

Tucker stirred. His color didn't seem too good. He licked his lips twice before saying, "Mustard pot. Top shelf."

I let her have her hand back and picked up the empty box. Without a word she led me into the next room, which looked like a cross between a den and an art museum. Two facing walls consisted entirely of glass-fronted display cases full of statuettes, pottery, and glass and china bric-a-brac—the kind of stuff a man in my line doesn't give a second look. She lifted down a squat, ugly china pot with pictures and French writing running around it and poured out the key on its long chain.

I relieved her of the key. I'd already spotted the phone in the room and I steered her away from it before I opened the safe. Between two arched doorways, one of which we'd just come through, stretched an expanse of paneled wall, blank except for a small chrome-plated clock. I swung the clock aside, put the key into the lock thus revealed, and rolled back the heavy camouflaged doors of the coin vault.

The coins were on open shelves, each in its own recess, in narrow trays covered with red, green, and blue velvet. Ashloe might or might not have more coins on deposit at the bank, but there were more than enough here to make the trip worthwhile.

I pulled a rubber glove on my left hand in case I touched

something that would hold a fingerprint. Without ceremony I started tipping the coins out into the box. Mrs. Ashloe came over and helped me, still keeping one wary eye on the pistol. Under cover of the noise we were making, she leaned toward me and whispered in my ear, "Kill him."

"What?"

"I want you to shoot him. Now."

I stopped dumping trays. "Why?"

She went on dumping trays. "Thirty-three years, that's why. Thirty-three years with Tucker Ashloe is more than flesh and blood can bear."

"Wouldn't it be easier to get a lawyer?"

"No, it wouldn't. I don't just want to be rid of him, I want to get my hands on his money." She spilled two more trays into the box. "Don't look at me like that. He's got millions, and we live from hand to mouth. Any one of these coins would pay our grocery bills for the past six months."

I handed her a couple. "Have some caviar on me."

She threw them into the box with the others. "Don't be silly. I'm talking business. Keep your voice down and come in here."

Remembering her lunge for the pistol, I made her go first and kept my distance. She led

me down a long, straight, dark, plushly carpeted hall that ended at a window seat. From there we could see the back of Ashloe's head as he sat on the couch in the living room, figuring up how much he was going to get out of his insurance company for the stolen coins.

I drew the curtains across the window and put on the light in the hall. When we sat side by side on the window seat, our eyes were nearly level.

"You mentioned business," I said, talking hardly above a murmur. "My business isn't killing people. Why should I risk the electric chair just because you're greedy? I've already got what I want."

A cynical smile tinged her bleak features with a gleam of hellfire. "Nobody ever gets all he wants. I'll pay you more than those coins are worth if you walk in there now and shoot Tucker."

"Nothing doing. What's to keep you from turning me over to the police when I try to collect?"

"I'll pay you in advance. Right now."

"And what were you thinking of paying me with? If you have to scrape for grocery money—"

"Listen. That man in there—" she pointed at him as if he were a piece of furniture

she wanted hauled away  
"—owns Visatergo Compressor Corporation, a Fortune 500 company. You certainly know that. You seem to know everything else about us."

"I checked out your domestic arrangements."

She rolled her eyes. "The only domestic arrangement around here is not spending any money. He'll only let me have a cleaning lady one half-day a week. My car is nine years old. I even have to cut his hair, what's left of it. The man simply has a phobia of spending capital. And since he reinvests every penny the company earns, everything he has is capital. He calls that a cash-flow problem."

"Sounds familiar," I said. "Great, management, rotten business."

"Well, listen here." She was getting thoroughly worked up. She caught at my words like a dog snapping at flies. "Tucker Ashloe's got a cash-flow problem he never dreamed about. I've been skimming the household accounts for more than twenty-five years. Had to. Self-defense."

I almost laughed out loud. "So where's the beef? You get your money, one way or the other."

"But this is peanuts compared to what I could have if he weren't holding the purse

strings. Six hundred thousand, as against forty-odd million."

"Hold on a minute. You mean you've *saved* all this cash you've been skimming?"

"Sure. It's money he thinks I spent, but I didn't. That's what skimming means, doesn't it?"

That time I did laugh, right in her face. "You've been hoarding up all this money behind his back, not spending it, and you think *he's* stingy. Whatever phobia he's got, I think you caught it."

She didn't like that a bit but in the circumstances she decided to let it pass. "Let's say I've been saving for something like this. I'm offering you six hundred thousand dollars in cash—old bills, mostly twenties, a few fifties—to kill my husband and then get lost."

"You've got it here?"

"I've got it here. You'll have it in your hands five minutes after he's dead."

"Impossible. Five minutes after he's dead I'll be on the interstate with a load of bricks in my right shoe. Your neighbors will hear the shot and be—"

"Don't you have a silencer? Maybe you could use a pillow."

"You've been watching too much TV. This isn't a Saturday night special, it's a .45."

She pondered. "If I pay you in advance, how do I know you'll really kill him?"

"You'd just have to trust me."

She thought some more. "How do I know you won't kill me, too?"

"I guess you don't. This killing business was your idea in the first place, you know."

"Then you'll do it?"

"I'll see that six hundred thousand first."

"Say you'll do it."

"I'll do it."

She kept the money in a space under the bottom shelf of a built-in cupboard in the master bedroom. About a third of it fitted into the wooden case on top of the coins. We put the rest into two double-strength shopping bags.

She arranged it all neatly on the kitchen table. Here she didn't need to whisper. "Okay, you've got your cash, now do it."

"First I've got to get the ropes off him and tie you up."

"Tie *me* up? Why?"

"It'll look better if the police find you tied instead of him. A burglar wouldn't tie somebody up and then shoot him."

She was frowning dark clouds of doubt. "He's going to wonder why you're untying him."

"I'll tell him I've got what I came for and I don't want to leave anything behind that could be traced to me. I'd better stick this stuff in the van before I go back in there."

"If you do, I'm coming with

you. You're not going to drive away from here—"

"Wake up, lady. All you need is for one stray neighbor to see you walking out to the van with me, and your goose is cooked. You stay in the house. Come to think of it, I'm going to lock you in that closet I saw with the key in the door."

"What do you want to do that for?"

"It'll only be for a minute. In case you get second thoughts and decide to call the police as soon as I go out the door."

The second thoughts were already coming to her thick and fast as I shut the closet door on her and turned the key. She put several of them into words. Passing through the hall, I noticed that Ashloe was sitting awfully still, and detoured for a reconnaissance. His color was worse than ever—about the shade of grape soda. He hadn't been breathing for the last ten minutes or so.

I got the ropes off him fast, hoping they hadn't left marks. Then I scrambled out the kitchen door with my double armload of loot, cut across the side yard as I'd planned earlier, and came through a hedge just opposite the van. By now it was completely dark and no cars passed on Teagarden Street while I was loading the stuff into the van. I took it on the

lam, as they say in cheap fiction, and my native haunts knew me no more, as I once heard a preacher express it.

Now comes the part about the liberal conscience. If I'd been a man of scruples, I would have had to give Mrs. Ashloe her money back. Maybe you'll say I earned the six hundred thousand by scaring Ashloe to death, but that's not quite true. The knowledge that I was stealing his coin collection didn't kill him, and neither did the fear that I was going to hurt him. He died because he thought I was down the hall murdering his wife, as he'd hired me to do when he visited my shop after hours a week earlier. He'd given me a cash advance, and the coins were the final payment.

I followed his scenario exactly as he'd written it, until he made a last-minute plot change by hiding the key to the coin vault so I couldn't get it until he told me where it was. But that's not why I didn't kill his wife. I never meant to kill her in the first place. I walked into that house with an empty gun. Just being in the same room with a loaded one makes my palms sweat.

So I guess the moral of the story is that if you've got no moral fiber it's awfully convenient not to have any moral convictions to speak of, either.

Visatergo Compressor Corporation just declared an extra dividend.

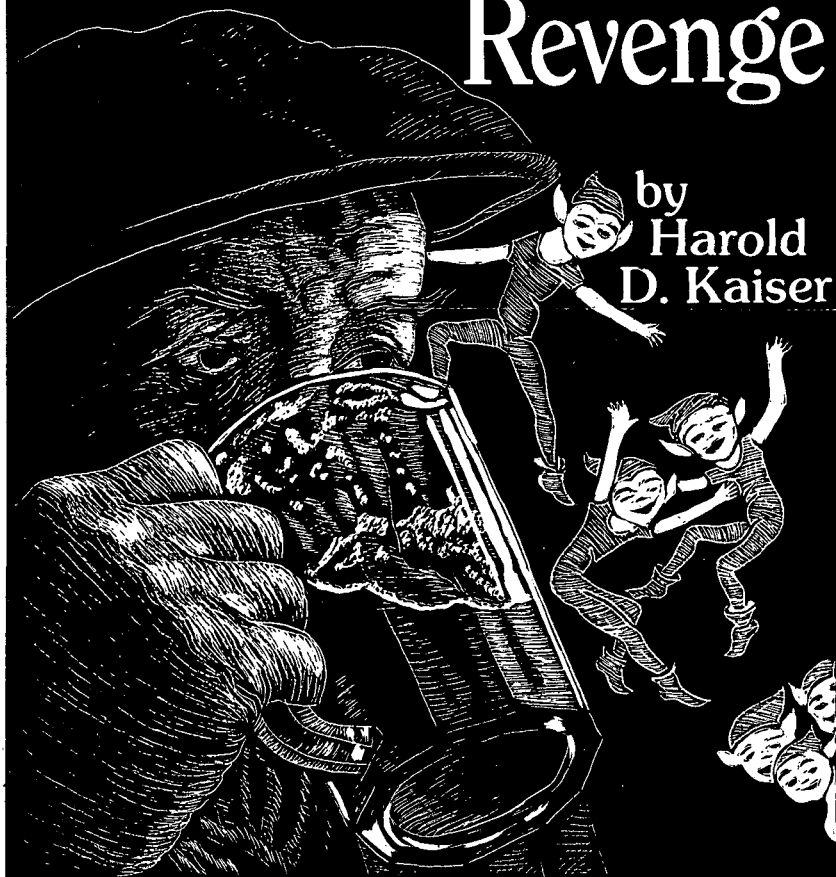
I wonder who she pretends she's stealing from now.

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# Guileford's Revenge

by  
Harold  
D. Kaiser



**M**uch obliged to ye. That goes down like mother's milk, it does.

You're wanting to know about Guileford's revenge, you say? Where did you hear about that?

From that blabbermouth Maude Coonan who runs the B&B where you're staying, no doubt. Little does she know, but she's always after finding out. But if I was you, I wouldn't ask too

much on that subject. It's not very popular here in Brogan's. In truth, it takes only a mention of Dennis Guileford in the snug here to start a shudder flickering around the room and hands clutching for the restorative. Even Brogan himself, usually a good sort, gets tight-faced at the mention and might tell you that you would be better off elsewhere.

Again, you say? Don't mind if I do. And seeing you're a gentlemen, I'll tell you what little I know of that terrible affair. You see, I'm one of the regulars, and all, but through a slight misunderstanding I was in the nick at the time and wasn't actually here when the Revenge happened. Which was just as well.

At first Brogan wouldn't talk about it, even to me. But one night after the place was closed, I stayed behind to talk to him about fixing the roof. Then we got to jawing and dipping into his private stock and I finally got him to tell me what happened.

First off, you have to know that Dennis Guileford was a runt; a dark, skinny lad, about five foot six. And, as you can see, the general run of clutter here is built along the lines of an earth remover and, believe you me, has brains to match. So when the place was crowded

you usually had to look under somebody's armpit to find Dennis. And you can imagine what that was like. But he was tough—aye, and smart. Keen as a winter wind. That and his size was his downfall.

You see, his folks, old Tom and Nora, are like the general run around here. Tom is at least six feet and fourteen stone. Nora bore eleven little ones like they was kittens and can fling a skillet with the best of them. Six of the boys grew up to be images of old Tom. The four girls are good healthy lasses and a couple of them are real beauties, too. You should see Rosemary, her that went to Dublin and got some bit parts on the telly until she snagged that rich old builder and gave her folks a life of ease. But that left poor Dennis odd man out, and even when he was a young lad there were more than a few behind-the-hand comments about that.

Of course, Dennis must have heard some of them. But he never let on, just minded his own business. He picked up his school work real quick and read a lot, which was a puzzlement to old Tom, who could barely read his own name when he got done signing it—which wasn't often. You have to give the old man credit, though. At that time they were poor as church mice and a shilling meant bread

for a week, but he kept Dennis in school as long as he was able. Dennis learned to do numbers and a little of what you call accounting, so when he finally had to leave school he was able to get work keeping the books for a half-dozen of the small businesses in these parts, including Brogan's. And a smart job he did, too. He could fuddle the tax man with the best of them and nary a whisper of scandal.

Now, keeping Brogan's books brought him into the pub quite a bit and what could be more natural than after the accounts were done he would hang about and have a pint or two.

So, you see, it was not too long before we began to notice something a wee bit strange. When he was sober, he was pleasant and mild as could be. But after a few pints, his dark face would flush and, especially if some clod would make a remark about his size, he would start to mutter some strange things.

Well, what it came down to was that he had been listening to the old wives' tales and doing some reading of the legends and had come to believe that he was a changeling.

What? You know about changelings, don't you? Ach, you Americans.

Oh, well now—if you believe in the old tales—when the fair-

ies see a bonnie newborn babe that they'd like to have for their own, they creep in and steal it away. But, like the magpies, they leave something in its place. Sometimes it's just a carved wooden figure. Sometimes it's an old and sick member of the tribe who needs more care than they are willing or able to give. More often than not, it's one of their own babes who's ugly (to their eyes) or weak. Then the human mother would take it in and bring up the babe as her own. Even if she did suspect, she would still care for the fairy babe in hopes that her own might be returned, or at least get good treatment from the fairies.

Of course, to believe all that you have to believe in fairies. Many's the poor babe who was thought to be a changeling but was just a throwback to some forgotten ancestor or a poor thing that caught a touch of the infantile paralysis or suchlike.

Anyhow, it soon became clear that Dennis thought he was one of those changelings. He felt that would explain his appearance and the slight limp he's had all his life. When he was sober, he had sense enough to keep his mouth shut about it. But when he had more Guinness than was good for him, his tongue would start flapping at both ends and out it would come as to how he was a fairy babe

who had been changed at birth for the Guileford. Worse, he began thinking that he was still in touch with the fairies and could feel them about and hear their voices.

Well, you can imagine the reaction of the boys to anyone claiming to be in touch with the fairies. Since they mostly liked Dennis—and still feared old Tom's fist—they tried to leave him alone. But then he would start in and soon it would be too much for them. They'd take to joshing him and the more they did the more he would drink and the more he would drink the more he would blather on about it. Sometimes it would get pretty heavy and Brogan would have to pound on the bar with his blackthorn to settle things down a bit.

Then when Dennis would sober up and realize what he had been saying, he would go around with a hang-dog look about him and hardly give you the time of day for a bit.

So it went on like this for a few months until the night it all happened.

Ah, it fair makes my mouth go dry and my throat stick closed when I think on it.

Another pint of Guinness, you say. Well now, that would not be at all amiss and I thank you.

So then, as I was saying—now you have to remember I was not

there at all and I'm just passing along what I was told by Brogan and, later, some of the others. So as they say, I cannot say yea or nay to it.

Anyhow. It was a Friday night, you see, and since the weather had come warm, many a powerful thirst had been worked up and the pub was fair crowded. Dennis, I'm told, had just finished Brogan's books for the quarter and all them dry figures had put his throat in an awful state, so he was downing the stuff like it was well water. Sure enough, soon he starts muttering how he had heard the fairies talking just the night before and had even seen their lights in the back garden. Well, of course, at first everyone tried to ignore him, as by now they were getting pretty well sick of it and they knew it would just lead to another argument.

But the fool kept on, getting louder and louder, until finally Hanihan, who is shorter on brains and temper than most, turns to him and says:

"So you heard the fairies again last night, did you?"

"That I did."

"And they were running around the bottom of your garden, were they?"

"That they were."

"And where were you when all this was going on?"

"I was standing in the kitchen door, getting a breath of air."

"Was there anyone else about?"

"Just me mom and Johnny."

"And they saw them, too, did they?"

"Of course not. They never do."

"What? You're the only one that sees them? Now how is that?"

"I've told you before, you big lump, it's because I'm a changeling."

Hanihan snickered.

"So you're a fairy."

Dennis hesitated, then squared his thin shoulders and drew up his whole five foot six.

"That I am."

Hanihan let out a loud guffaw and turned to the room.

"Boys, we've got here tonight a genuine fairy in our midst."

He turned back to Dennis.

"Prove it. Let's see you flap your wings and fly around the room. Or are you just the ordinary pouf kind?"

Well, that did it. One word led to ten more and finally Dennis grabs a glass from the bar, breaks the edge off it, and tries to do some plastic surgery on Hanihan's ugly face. It would have been an improvement, but of course they couldn't let it happen. So a couple of the boys picks Dennis up, drops him on the floor, and sits on him, him yelling bloody murder all the while.

"So what do we do now?" says Murphy. "I can't keep me bum on his face all night. For one thing, he's starting to bite."

They all knew he was a stubborn little runt and if they let him up he would just start right in again. Brogan looked thoughtful and fingered his blackthorn wistfully. Then he shook his head and sighed.

"Well, let's put him down in the beer cellar for a bit. Maybe a couple of hours communing with the kegs will sober him up enough so he'll listen to reason."

So two of them picked him up, him still trying to do what damage he could, and, led by Brogan, took him down the stairs, dumped him in the beer cellar, and snapped the padlock on it.

Now, I want you to be clear on the beer cellar. It's below ground, hollowed out of the dirt and walled with rough stone so as to stay cool. The door is two inch oak with a stout padlock to which only Brogan has the key. The ceiling is the floor of this pub, heavy beams and two inch planks to bear the weight of the sixteen stone customers without a creak or groan. So they locked him in and tramped back upstairs firm in the belief that Dennis would stay put for a while.

They could still hear him faintly through the floor, yell-

ing to be let out and saying what he would do if he got out. And the language he was using, it was a good thing there were no ladies present. Not that there ever was in Brogan's.

"If he starts fooling with the kegs, I'll have to go down and lay him out," says Brogan, with a bit of hopefulness in his voice.

But after a few more bellows, Dennis seemed to realize that the only thing he was doing was fraying his throat and he pretty much shut up, except for an occasional word that you wouldn't want to hear in church.

So the boys settled down to their pints and a quiet debate on the merits of the teams in Saturday's soccer game.

Well then, it was all the more startling when Dennis's voice suddenly surged through the floor like the wood wasn't there.

"The fairies! They're coming. They're coming!"

"Damn," says Brogan.

Then there was one loud banshee scream and utter silence.

"Mother of God," says Brogan. "That ain't human."

And he runs downstairs with everyone else at his heels. His hands were actually trembling as he unlocked the padlock and pushed open the door, the rest crowding in after him.

What a sight! The room was filled with a green glow which came from a slowly fading cir-

cle on the far wall. Not only that, but Brogan, Hanihan, and Paddy McDermott all insist that as they looked at the circle, they could see sort of a tunnel and a room at the other end with television sets and panels with dials and things on them. And poor Dennis in this room, screaming but no sounds coming out. That's what they said, but I wouldn't know about that. Then the green circle closed down and the room went dark.

Well sir, for once that whole bunch of boyos had the bejabbers scared out of them. They stood stock still and breathed heavily until Brogan finally shook himself and snapped on the light. Then they searched that cellar from top to bottom and end to end, but there was nary a trace of Dennis Guileford nor clue as to how he had got out of there. And there's been never a sign of him since.

Yes sir, that was quite a night, it was.

What about the Revenge, you say? Right. Well now, after searching the room, they all trooped back up to the bar, not looking at each other and not wanting to say what they had seen. And there they stood, like a bunch of little lost puppy dogs, not knowing what to do next.

Finally Brogan, who deep down had really liked little

Dennis, went to the taps, pulled twelve pints of the best, and lined them up on the bar.

"Here, boys, take a glass. The least we can do is to drink to poor Dennis."

They each took a glass and solemnly raised it.

"Here's to Dennis Guileford. May he prosper wherever he is."

Well, twelve pints started down twelve dry throats and suddenly there was lager spraying all over the room and sputtering and cursing coming from all corners.

For, you see, the stuff had turned bad. Sour as vinegar. Undrinkable. Terrible.

So Brogan and Murphy and Hanihan headed back to the cellar. To make short of it, they ended up tapping all ten kegs that were there and all of them were bad. Hanihan claims that after they had tapped the last and were standing around looking at each other, trying not to cry, he heard a ghostly laugh in the air, but I don't believe that at all.

So they went back upstairs and broke the news. You can imagine the pitiful sight. Up

here were twelve stalwarts who had been through a terrible experience and had developed an awesome thirst and down there were ten kegs with not a good pint amongst them. I tell you it was so bad that Brogan did something till then unheard of. He stood whiskies all around. Small ones to be sure, but still—

And as they lifted their glasses and drank off, you can be sure there was no toast to Dennis Guileford to be heard.

Later on, Brogan even got this chemist down from the brewery, but the man just shook his head and muttered something about little waves or some such nonsense and went back to Dublin as fast as he could, and so much for him.

So now you know why it's not wise to mention too loud the name of Dennis Guileford on these here premises.

Another one, you say? That would be lovely, but I'd better not. And I'd best be getting along home. Since that last little misunderstanding with the law, Susan (that's me dear wife) has taken to be a little sharp about such matters. So I'll bid ye good night and all.





# The Case of the Gray Granite Dog

by Emma Lou Schenk



**M**y mom would never have let me take a morning paper route if she'd known I'd get mixed up with a murderer. Me, Howie Marcus, a twelve-year-old kid! I mean, who'd think such a thing.

My paper route went down Buccaneer Boulevard, through Frangipani Court, and wound up on Oleander Drive. All the houses were pretty ordinary; even the one where it happened was just your standard pink stucco bungalow like we have here in Florida. The only thing different was the big statue of the gray granite dog out front. Everybody else has flamingos.

The house belonged to a lady named Mrs. Bonner. She's as old as Mom, I suppose, but she doesn't look old. What she looks like is my kid sister's Barbie doll. She has shiny blue eyes, and long dark hair, and a questioning kind of look like she isn't quite sure what's going on.

The first time I went there to collect it was about four o'clock in the afternoon, but she was still in her bathrobe, a slippery pink thing tied at the middle. Now in Florida you get used to seeing girls without much on, but there was something about the way Mrs. Bonner was all covered up and showing through at the same time which made me realize what a hot day it

was. Needing an excuse to look elsewhere, I pointed at the statue.

"Nice dog," I said. "What kind is it?"

"Kind? Oh, very. He is... was the kindest dog in the world. I adored him." She sniffed so sadly over her pocketbook that I forgot about the bathrobe. All I ever wanted was to cheer her up some.

"Yes, ma'am," I said. "Labs usually are nice, aren't they?"

"Oh, but he's not a Lab. He's a... he was an Irish setter."

The dog stood with one front paw raised and its tail sticking out. To my mind, the body was much too gray and heavy for a setter.

"Keep the change," she went on. "He... I mean, Popeye won't mind."

I looked at my hand. She'd given me a twenty dollar bill.

"Tell him thanks, ma'am," I said, thinking Popeye was the dog's name.

As I finished my collecting, I thought about Mrs. Bonner, how kind of soft she was and how sad. She reminded me of a rabbit I'd seen once. Run over by a car, I guess. It was all bloody, and lying half under a palmetto bush, and it stared up at me like it was begging me to put it out of its misery. Only I was already late for school so I told myself, okay, if it's still

there when I come home, I'll take it to the vet or something.

But it wasn't, and I've felt bad about it ever since.

Maybe that's why I decided to do what I could for Mrs. Bonner. Not that I could do much. She was never around in the morning when I delivered. I think that's why I took to giving the gray granite dog a pat on the head every morning.

It was funny, you know, petting a statue. You've got to be nuts. What's more, I soon realized I wasn't the only one. Between the ears, the granite was real smooth.

Then one morning I saw a food dish in front of the dog. Apparently she pretended to feed him, too.

"I brought your dog a can of Alpo," I said the next time I went to collect. I don't think my wanting to help her had anything to do with the bathrobe, but I was sure enough disappointed when she came to the door wearing a regular dress.

"Beautiful," she replied, staring in her shiny-eyed way at the label. Pausing, she leaned closer. "You pet him, too, don't you. I see you in the mornings."

"Yes, ma'am," I admitted, wondering why grown up women always smell so much better than girls my age.

"I like that," she said. "You are friend to my friend. We are

all friends. Man's best friend, they say, but that's a lie."

Sighing, she tucked the Alpo can under her arm, reached in her purse, and handed me another twenty dollar bill. I stared at the twenty hopefully, but she didn't say anything about keeping the change.

"He's my friend, too, ma'am," I said, beginning to count it out. "Good old Popeye, I pet him every morning."

Suddenly her eyes hardened. "Who?"

"Who what, ma'am?"

"Who do you pet?"

"Popeye, ma'am. Like you said." I pointed to the gray granite dog. "Well, here's your change."

"Wrong," she said. "Wrong. Wrong. Wrong." Her voice rose and her face got closer each time she said it. Her eyes were filled with tears.

I felt I should apologize, but I didn't know for what. Then, suddenly, she turned and went back in her house. The change was still in my hand.

I knocked on the door, but she didn't answer so I stood there for a while wondering what to do.

After a couple of minutes, I decided I'd better check with the neighbors—not to be nosy or anything, but just hoping someone would tell me how I could help.

"What's with Mrs. Bonner?" I asked Mrs. Fletching, who lived next door.

Mrs. Fletching is about six feet tall. She used to be a P.E. teacher and after all those years yelling at the kids on the playground, she has a voice like a Marine drill instructor. She stopped teaching after five kids got grown and gone. Now she spends most of her time at the beach.

"Mrs. Bonner?" Mrs. Fletching boomed. "Nutty as a fruitcake. Why do you ask?"

Embarrassed, I looked over at the pink stucco bungalow. The door was shut and so were the windows.

"Well, she's sad all the time," I whispered, even though it was unlikely Mrs. Bonner could hear. "And she pets Popeye . . . feeds him, too."

"Popeye?" Mrs. Fletching arched her sun bleached eyebrows. "Say, kid, do you know something nobody else knows?"

"Not unless the dog's name is a secret," I said, pointing to the statue. "Popeye, right?"

"No way, Jose." Like all teachers, Mrs. Fletching's slang is years out of date.

"So who's Popeye then?"

"Her husband. Man, what a hunk, but lazy. About all he ever did was go sailing. You get it? Popeye, the sailor man."

"The spinach dude," I said,

then realized she was talking past tense. "Gee, is he dead or something?"

"Or something mostly."

"Well, what?"

Tilting her head, she examined me with one eye closed. "Naah," she said, after a moment. "I better not tell you. It's just gossip."

"Gee, Mrs. Fletching, if I'm going to deliver papers there, don't you think I ought to know."

She grinned as if I'd said something real smart. It was what I figured she'd do. Teachers are never really happy unless they are instructing somebody.

"Okay, kiddo," she said. "It's like this. Last year he took the dog and went sailing right out into this big thunderstorm."

"And he drowned, huh?"

"Who knows? They found the boat down by Sandy Cay. And the dog, too. He was locked in the cabin. But not Popeye. Him they never found."

"Wow," I said. "Her husband and her dog, all the same day. No wonder she's so sad."

"Yeah, she was nuts about that dog. He was sort of like a baby to her, but—" Mrs. Fletching rolled her eyes "—but don't feel *too* sorry. A month or so earlier old Popeye had taken out enough insurance to choke a goat. Near half a million bucks, she got. I'd have moved



to some snazzy condo, but all she did was buy that statue."

"Well, maybe she can't bear to leave the happy memories behind or something."

"That's pretty ro-man-tic for a kid your age."

"Yeah, well, I watch a lot of television."

"Not enough, I guess, or you'd ask how the insurance company felt."

I was smarting over the way she'd smirked over romantic, so I snapped back, "I didn't think it was necessary. Obviously the insurance company would be totally bent out of shape."

"You bet your suntan, they were. They figure the sailor boy's hiding out some place. They even asked us to be on the lookout, but I say, she's a neighbor, right? So who cares about the reward?" She grasped my arm and pulled me close. When she spoke, her voice had turned to what was probably the closest to a whisper she could get. "Now, what's all this about feeding Popeye?"

"Nothing," I said, hastily. "I had it wrong. I had everything all wrong."

As I bicycled home, I tried to figure it out. Mrs. Fletching said she didn't care about the reward, but you didn't have to be Magnum, P.I., to know she was lying. How big a reward, I wondered.

I could get it myself, proba-

bly, if I worked it right. I was pretty sure if I asked questions, Mrs. Bonner would answer. After all, hadn't she said I was her friend?

On the other hand, the idea of trying to worm information out of a friend made me feel sort of dirty. Besides, I couldn't see how someone like her could be any kind of a crook. She was too far up in the clouds.

The whole next week I argued back and forth with myself. I couldn't talk with Mom about it. I hadn't even told her about the big tips, partly because I had put them aside for her Christmas present but mostly because she might make me give them back if she knew.

"I have just come from the bank," Mrs. Bonner said the following Friday when I stopped by to collect. Her makeup was smeared and her eyes reflected red from the afternoon sun.

She's been crying, I thought, suddenly remembering how Mom had held me close and we had both cried together back when I was four and being very scared after Dad died.

I wished I could make Mrs. Bonner feel better like Mom had done for me, but I guess the reward was still on my mind, too, because instead of saying something nice, I did just the opposite.



"Oh," I said, "did you get money for Popeye?"

"Popeye!" She bit her lip. "Don't be cruel."

"Gosh, I'm sorry. I didn't mean to ask. I—I, well, the words just popped out."

"Yes. Yes, I see." Her soft hand was on my shoulder. "I was wrong to lose my temper. After all, you are our friend—just about our only friend these days."

She wiped her eyes and took a deep breath. All at once she seemed very calm, like people do when they've made a decision. Bending down, she looked straight into my eyes.

"But not Popeye," she said, her voice so stiff and cold it was like she had put an ice pick right through me, clear down to my toes. "Not him. The murderer."

I felt my mouth drop open. Insurance fraud was one thing, but if it was murder, then I had almost a duty to ask questions.

"But he's dead," I said. "What does it matter now?"

"Everything matters. Murderers should be punished. You agree don't you?"

"Well, sure, Mrs. Bonner. But how can he be punished, I mean, well—" It was the opening I needed. "Unless he's still alive."

She shook her head. "I'm not supposed to tell."

Suddenly she turned. The door slammed shut behind her.

As I went down her walk, stopping as always to pat the gray granite dog, I thought it over. In effect, she had told me Popeye *was* still alive, but so what? Everybody knew that, including Mrs. Fletching and the insurance company. What they didn't know about was the murder.

Of course, the fact of the matter was I didn't know much about it myself.

It wasn't till I was half asleep in bed that night that I remembered Mrs. Bonner hadn't paid me for the paper. Lucky break, I thought, glad to have an excuse to go over there again the next afternoon.

This time, however, I'd have my can of dog food, and I'd ask her what kind the dog liked best, and that would get her talking. Yeah, this time I'd really get some information.

Or was it wrong to be so sneaky?

Twisting in my bed, I pulled the sheets up tight, and shut my eyes. First I'd think about the reward, and how nice it would be to buy a new bike and maybe a boom box for the beach, but just when I'd get feeling pretty snazzy about the whole thing, I'd remember how Mrs. Bonner was so sweet and soft and pretty, and how she said I was her friend. The last thing in the world I wanted to do was to hurt her.

When I went back the next day, she answered the door in her pink bathrobe again.

"Oh, Howie," she said. "I didn't pay you, and I didn't know whether to call or just wait till next week."

"Yes, ma'am, Mrs. Bonner," I said, hitching back and forth from one foot to another. She was a lot easier to talk to when she wasn't wearing that bathrobe.

"Come in for a moment," she said, "while I get my purse."

I gulped. My throat felt dry. "Yes, ma'am, Mrs. Bonner," I repeated, although it really wasn't necessary as I was already following her inside. The air conditioning hit me like a blast of cold arctic air.

"Wait here," she said. "I'll be right back."

I was standing in a long hallway. Mrs. Bonner had disappeared through a half opened door at the far end of the hall.

I stood there hitching back and forth, and looking into the living room which was, if possible, even pinker than the stucco outside. The furniture and the rugs were both white. It was a very ladylike room. I was wondering if the dog had been allowed in there, and if so had she given it a bath every day, when all at once I heard

her cry out, as if in pain.

Quickly I ran down the hall. "What's wrong, Mrs. Bonner?" I yelled. "Are you okay?"

The room at the end of the hall was the kitchen. She was leaning against the stove, hugging herself, her arms so tight that her whole body quivered.

"Help me," she said. Her words were stiff and shaky. "Please help me."

There was a knife rack over the stove, and all at once I remembered all that suicide prevention stuff we get at school these days.

"Don't do it, Mrs. Bonner," I blurted. "You mustn't even think such a thing. You can get another dog. I saw one the other day, red it was, just like yours. Is that his picture there on the refrigerator? My, he must have been a nice dog. For God's sake, Mrs. Bonner, please. I mean, what do you want me to do?"

I wanted to say more, but I was out of breath. My heart was pounding so hard I thought she could probably hear it.

Only she didn't, I guess. She was staring all glassy-eyed at the knives like they were the answer to all her prayers.

Say something, Howie, I told myself. Don't just stand there with your mouth opening and shutting like some dumb goldfish.

And then I realized I was say-

ing something. There were words coming out.

"You cut that out right now, Mrs. Bonner," I heard myself say. Even at the time, it seemed a poor choice of words, but I went on anyway. "I mean, I don't have time for this kind of nonsense. I just came by for my money."

Maybe it was because I sounded so much like my mom does when my little sister and I get in a fight. Or maybe she'd just been putting on an act. Anyway, something I said got her attention because a moment later she gave her head a quick jerk and opened her eyes.

"Yes, of course," she said. "That would be stupid. Justice, that's what we need. You'll help me, won't you?"

"I don't know. I'll try."

"I'll explain," she said. "Nothing was supposed to happen. It was just going to be kind of a game, and then we would move to the Bahamas or something. But now he says getting rid of the dog made it all seem more realistic. The dog, he says. Oh, God, he doesn't even call her by name."

Suddenly I saw how stupid I'd been, thinking she was so pitiful. What a crock. She'd been in on the plot right from the start, and still was, too, only the guy had killed off her dog so now

she was yelling for justice. Some kind of murderer. Oh, boy.

"But you're the one that ripped off the insurance company," I said.

"Dirty money. I don't want it."

"So go to the police."

"Oh, no, Howie. Don't you see? I couldn't. I can't. You don't know about the police. You don't know about jails."

When she was little, she went on breathlessly, her words all kind of stacked up on top of each other, her mother didn't want her so she'd been put in a foster home where the people treated her real bad, but they had this real nice dog, and when she ran away she took it with her. She had to steal some stuff to eat, and after that they put her in a juvenile jail, which was worse than the foster home. There was more, a lot more, and it was all pretty awful, particularly the part about everybody knocking her around.

"Do you see now, Howie," she wound up. "Do you see why I'm afraid to go to the police?"

I nodded. I still felt sorry for her, but I was beginning to understand her, too.

She'd lived more years than Mom, maybe, but in her head, she was still a little kid. The dog wasn't her baby. It was like her whole family.

"Okay," I said, after a while.

"I see why you're scared to go to the police, but what about the money?"

"Dirty money." Balling her hands into fists, she held them to her mouth. I couldn't make out what she said next, but I thought it sounded something like "I feed it to Cassie."

"Cassie? Who's Cassie?"

"What?" She looked up. "But that's not—" She paused, shook her head again, then waved her hand toward the picture of the dog. "Cassie is our friend. Cassandra really. You thought her name was Popeye at first, remember?"

"Oh, yeah, and you never told me different."

I smiled a little, and then jumped because all at once she banged her fist down on the stove.

"Howie," she said firmly. "We need a plan."

"A plan?"

"Yes, indeed. A murderer should be brought to justice." Her hands were on my shoulders, her face close. "You agree, don't you?"

So she was back on that kick again. "Yeah, I guess."

"So you'll tell. Right?"

"Tell who what?"

"Everything. To everybody. You know it all now."

But of course I didn't know any more than I had when I first arrived. Besides, it was obvious she'd gone off wandering

around in her squirrel cage again.

"That's a real great plan, ma'am," I said, suddenly wanting only to get out of there. "Now can I have the money for the paper, please. My mom's probably waiting dinner on me."

Her shiny, sad eyes seemed to follow me all the way home.

I didn't sleep much that night. Somewhere toward morning I heard the doves crying outside, and I found myself wondering if she sometimes sat up all night, petting the gray granite dog and crying.

But then, when I was eating breakfast, I found myself thinking about the reward again. After all, Mrs. Bonner was no kid, and anyway, she was pretty much a crook even if she was sad.

Pouring out the cornflakes, I decided to go tell the police. "Hey, guys," I'd say. "You want to know how she connects with Popeye. Easy. She's got this gray granite dog statue and she feeds it the money."

Yeah, sure.

Leave it alone, Howie, I told myself. Just forget the whole business.

**T**hat decision stood for two whole days, but then—well, here's what happened.

I always went down one side

of Oleander Street and up the other, and I wasn't on Mrs. Bonner's side when I saw the man. It was still dark out because it was late November and foggy like it gets in the fall. Even so, I could see his gait was unsteady. A drunk maybe.

Or a sailor?

Ducking behind a hedge, I watched the man lurch up to the statue, look all around, then pick up the dog dish, hide it inside his jacket, and stroll away.

So that's how she gets the money to him, I thought. That business about feeding the money to Cassie wasn't so crazy after all.

As soon as I finished my route I went down to the police station. They laughed, at first, but after a while they saw what I meant.

That morning I didn't go to school. I just hung around on Oleander Street waiting to see what would happen, and thinking about how scared she was of the jail and stuff. I really got disgusted with myself.

In fact, I was just about to go warn her when a police car cruised slowly down the street. It stopped at her house. Two guys got out. They went to her door and knocked. She came to the door in her slippery pink bathrobe. She looked as pretty as I'd ever seen her.

The police talked to her for a couple of minutes, then they

all went into the house. A few minutes later, they all came back out. She was dressed now, and carrying a small suitcase.

As they headed down the walk to the car, I decided I had to say something. I felt so terrible for turning her in. Jumping out from behind my bush, I ran across the yard.

"I'm sorry, Mrs. Bonner," I said. "I had to tell them. Please don't hate me."

"Hate you, Howie?" She smiled, and I noticed that her eyes looked softer, less glassy. "Why would I do that? We had a plan. We had to bring the murderer to justice." The policemen tried to push me away, but she wouldn't let them. "Let me talk to my friend," she said, taking my hand in hers. "Look, Howie, would you do me a favor?"

"Anything," I said.

"Cassie gets so lonesome. Pet her once in a while, just for me."

The policemen were staring, and I could see Mrs. Fletching standing in her driveway, but I didn't care.

"Yes, ma'am," I said. "Don't you worry. I'll pet her and bring her food and everything."

My eyes felt oozy. Not wanting anyone to see, I bent down to pet the gray granite dog. I heard the car door open, then shut. They were gone.

They picked up Popeye the next day. He'd been hiding out

down in the Everglades someplace. She told them where to find him, and all about the mail drop they had with the clues in the newspaper and everything.

You see, I had it all wrong. It wasn't Popeye I saw that morning. Some hungry tramp maybe, but not Popeye. She hadn't even said she fed the money to Cassie. She'd said, he reads the classifieds.

I mean, I had it all wrong. I told the insurance company when they came around to say I was going to get the reward, but they said, wrong or not, it was on account of what I did that the police caught Popeye.

“Well, Howie,” my mom said a couple of weeks later. “You must be very proud of yourself.”

We'd just put the reward money in the bank and we were having a big ice cream sundae

to celebrate. There wasn't much to celebrate from my standpoint. The reward had turned out to be pretty big, so big in fact that Mom put it all in the bank for college. No stereo, not even a new bike.

“Aw, gee, Mom,” I mumbled. “I don't know.”

I wanted to tell her the whole story, only I was pretty sure she'd be hurt because I hadn't told her way back when it all got started.

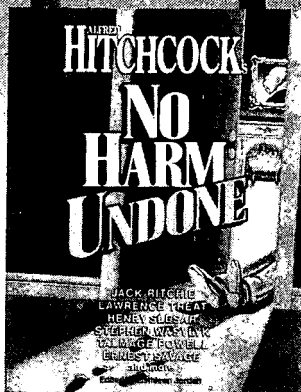
Besides, I wasn't proud of myself, not one little bit. It was like that dumb rabbit. I didn't put it out of its misery and that made me feel awful. Okay, I won't make that mistake again. So what do I do? I put Mrs. Bonner out of her misery, and that makes me feel even worse.

Licking the last drip of ice cream off my spoon, I wondered if it was just me, or do other people get all mixed up inside about junk like that, too.



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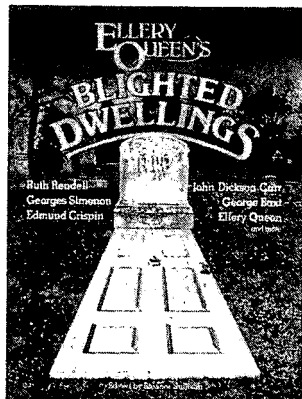
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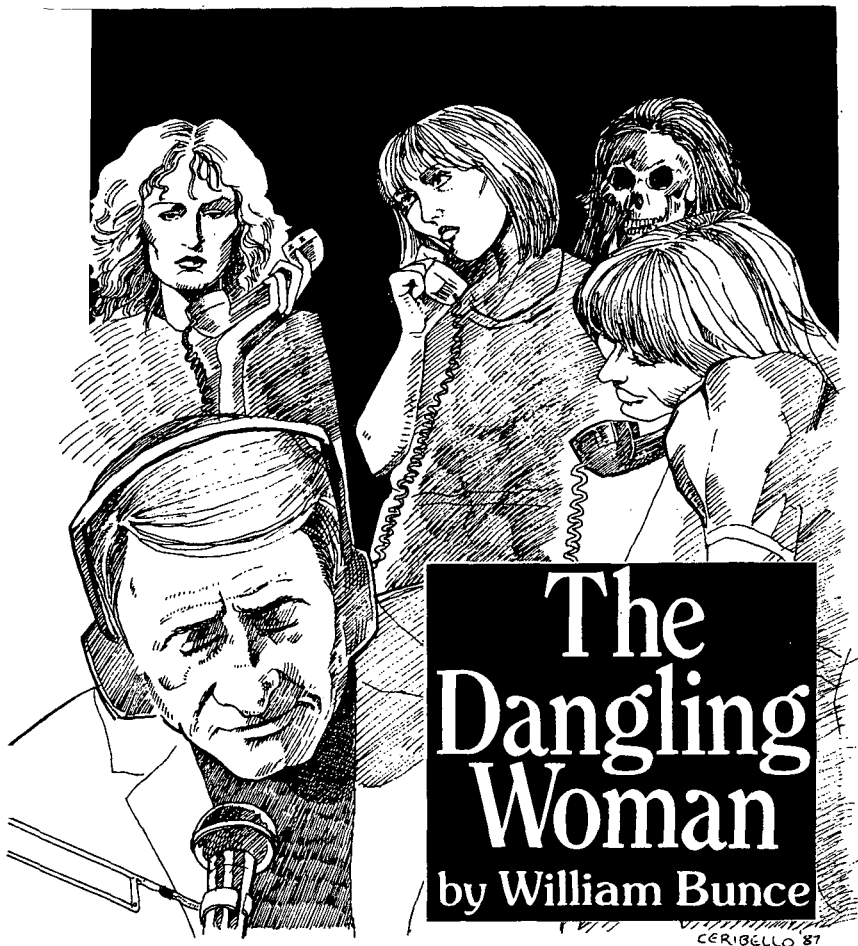
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SK271



# The Dangling Woman

by William Bunce

CERIBELLO '87

Owen winked at Sam, the studio engineer, as the voice on his headphones droned on. "I don't know why he would run around on me," the voice was saying. "After twenty years, he tells me he's been seeing another woman. I

swear she's young enough to be his daughter."

The quiver in her voice told him she was about to burst into tears; but he headed her off. "Now, now, my dear," he soothed. "It's not uncommon for an older man to become in-

volved with a woman half his age. It's not the end of the world. Give him a little time and when he finally pulls out of his tailspin, your marriage will be stronger than ever."

"He told me he wants to see a lawyer..." Her words dissolved into a torrent of sobs.

This woman wasn't about to listen to reason, Owen decided. Her blubbering was starting to break up his sound quality. "Sorry," he said brightly, "I have to give some time to the folks who pay the bills. Thanks for calling." He punched line number three dead. "This is your personal marriage counselor, Dr. Owen Stanford, here to provide comfort and advice to those lonely voices in the night. We'll be right back after a few words from Alpine Dog Food—your pooch would climb a mountain for it."

After cuing in the dog food tape, he leaned back in the chair and stared at the lights blinking on his console, every one representing some small portion of human misery. Suffering sells, isn't that what the station manager had said? Now his sponsors were fighting each other for air time, and a more lucrative contract was in the works. Owen had found his niche. As long as the faithful were willing to lap up his bland prescriptions for marital bliss,

he was willing to dish them out.

Sam came into the booth with a freshly delivered pizza, still steaming in the box. "If you ask me, that last dame was the pits. With a voice like that, it's no wonder hubby ran out on her."

"Yeah, she was a whiner, wasn't she?" That was the only trouble with this job, Owen thought. Rarely did a man call in to discuss a problem. He was forced to listen to a never-ending chorus of whining women. Then he had to go home to Marcia—the worst whiner of the lot. "Why don't you set up practice like a professional? A bartender has better hours than you do. Only trash wash their dirty linen in public." On and on it went. Unfortunately, he couldn't silence his wife with the mere push of a button.

But there were other ways.

He threw his headset on just in time to catch the closing of the ad. "Alpine Dog Food," he crooned. "Your pooch would climb a mountain for it." Owen twirled his hand over the board like a magician about to produce a rabbit out of a hat and pressed the number three button. "Dr. Owen Stanford here, and what is your problem?"

There was no answer. Dead air—the worst thing that can happen in radio. Cursing under his breath, he reached for a slice of pizza. "Seems we have

a teeny case of stage fright out there," he said into the mike. "Don't be shy, my dear. Pretend you're talking to your oldest and dearest friend." Nothing. Outside the booth, Sam drew a finger across his throat. Owen was just about to hit the next button when a sound came over the line. It was so low and hoarse and buried in static he couldn't make it out at first. "You'll have to speak up if you want to stay on the air," he warned.

"My husband," the voice said. It was still barely audible. For some reason, Owen was reminded of the times as a child when he had held a seashell up to his ear and listened to the throb of waves on a distant shore. He turned up the volume slightly.

"Your husband, madam? What about your husband?"

This time the voice was clearer. "What do you think of a man who does violence to his wife?"

Owen jolted upright in his seat, his face the color of the cardboard box in front of him. He yanked off the earphones and flung them down on the console. His eyes were pinned to the little red number three light.

"Something the matter, doc?" Sam raced into the booth just in time to catch him as he stumbled over some cables on the

floor. Owen wiped the perspiration from his brow and tried to collect himself. "That voice. It sounded just like . . ."

"Just like who?"

He looked at the fat, good-natured face of his engineer. "No," he said, shaking his head. "It's nothing, Sam. Look, would you mind cuing in some music while I splash some water on my face?"

"Sure, doc." He helped him over to the door. "You go pull yourself together. Look like you've seen a ghost."

At three o'clock in the morning the station was deserted except for Sam and him, but he went down a darkened corridor to a pay phone and called a number he had written on a piece of paper.

He counted as the phone rang three times. On the fourth, someone picked up the receiver and a gruff voice said, "Hello?"

"This is Owen Stanford. What in blazes went wrong?"

"Wrong? Nothing went wrong." The man sounded offended. "I told you. I'm a professional at this business."

"Marcia must've gotten out of it," he hissed into the phone. "She just called me over the air."

There was a pause at the other end. "Did she say she was your wife?"

"No, but . . ."

"Then how do you know it

was her?" The voice was calm, analytic, and there was a certain contempt for Owen's panicky thinking. "Look," the man continued, "I did it just like I planned it. I went in through the bedroom window you left unlatched and let her have it while she was listening to your show. She must have sensed me in the room. Funny thing was she didn't scream or anything. She just said, 'Owen sent you, didn't he?' I said, 'Yeah, and he paid me a bundle.' Then I hit her. If you know the right spot, it only takes once. I checked her pulse just to make sure. Luckily, she was still dressed, so I took her car out to Indian Point and dropped her over the edge. It must be five hundred feet down to the highway. A few cars will probably run over her in the fog before they find the body. All the loose ends have been tied together neatly. Nothing to worry about, pal. Not many of my clients have a live radio show for an alibi."

Owen leaned against the wall. "Maybe you're right. Maybe my nerves are getting the best of me."

"Sure, and one more thing, pal."

"What's that?"

"You come blabbing over the phone again and you'll join your missus."

"Sorry to bother you." Owen slammed down the phone.

The hit man was right. It must be his imagination. How could a woman, bludgeoned to death, dumped over the side of a cliff, and run over by some passing cars, pick up a phone and badger him over the air? No, the whole idea was ridiculous. If he had only continued the conversation, he would have found the caller to be a total stranger, another poor slob looking for a mental massage, just like the rest.

He went into the men's room and washed his face with cold water. It made him feel a lot better. He looked at his face in the mirror. Fifty years old and he still had his good looks. Too good to waste on some over-the-hill crone who didn't appreciate his celebrity status. There were plenty of young women out there aching to hook up with a radio personality like himself. After an appropriate period of mourning, Dr. Owen Stanford was determined to accommodate them.

He ran through the next few hours in his mind. If he didn't get a call from the cops first, he would go straight home from the studio and report Marcia's disappearance. They would find her empty car at the top of Indian Point and her body hundreds of feet below on the highway. Of course he would mention her recent depression. The thought made him smile.

Marcia was nothing if not depressing.

Owen returned to the booth with his confidence restored. Sam was sitting in his swivel chair, finishing the last piece of pizza. "Feeling okay? I figured you didn't want any of this, so I saved you the trouble of throwing it out."

"I'm all right now. For a minute I felt sick at my stomach."

The engineer got up and brushed the crumbs from his lap. "None of your customers gave up hope." He pointed to the bank of red lights, all blinking in happy unison. "Sure must be a lot of washed-up marriages out there. Glad I never got the urge."

Owen sat down and hit the mike switch. "Sorry for the slight delay. This is Dr. Owen Stanford, back to speak with you about your marriage problems." He pressed button number one. "And how might I help you, my dear?"

For the next hour everything ran smoothly. There was the usual assortment of infidelities, desertions, boring partners—typical complaints that Owen had come to expect over the last two years. For every agonized question, he reached into his bottomless box of glib answers. Sometimes he wondered why all those dimwitted housewives never caught on. Two hundred bucks to a prestigious-sounding

diploma mill, a smooth way with words, and you were in business.

Just before dawn it happened again. He had finally gotten rid of a woman whose husband had gambled away their life savings when the same voice came back on number three. The question was also the same: "What do you think of a man who does violence to his wife?"

This time Owen was ready. "I don't think there is any place in a sound marriage for that sort of thing. Have you considered, however, that it is not you he is striking, but someone or something else that has been bothering him? Perhaps your failure to recognize his difficulties has aggravated the situation." He relished turning the tables on them with half-baked psychology. Pretty soon he would have her apologizing for having been beaten.

He also knew the collective ear of his audience was waiting for the lurid details. "You said he does violence to you. What sort of violence do you mean exactly?"

For a few seconds the static drowned out everything, and Owen was just about to cut over to another call when the voice returned. It was crisp and clear and there was no mistaking her words. "My husband had me killed."

In a split second Owen had



cut her off. Cold sweat trickled down his neck. He tried to regain control, but his voice shook like a highwire act in a stiff breeze. "Sorry, folks. Must be a full moon out tonight. Let's see who's on the next line."

Amazingly, the creepy, hoarse voice crackled through his ear-phones again. "What do you think of a man who would have his own wife killed?"

He stabbed his finger at number five and the eerie voice came back asking the same question. In a desperate frenzy, Owen ran through the whole row of buttons, but Marcia's voice followed him relentlessly: "What do you think of a man who would have his own wife killed?"

Finally he could stand it no longer. When the goading question whined through the last line, he screamed into the mike. "Sure, I had you killed, you useless old woman. I paid a fortune to have you dumped over Indian Point just to get rid of that voice, and I'd do it again . . ."

He felt Sam's beefy arms drag him away from the console. "Doc, please!" The engineer managed to get him into the lobby and onto one of the leather couches. "You lie here," he said. "Let me get something to help you relax."

In a minute he was back with some pills and a glass of water. "I knew getting locked up with

all those crazy phone calls would get to you sooner or later. You lie back and get some sleep. I'll take care of everything."

Owen closed his eyes. The pills did their work quickly. In a few moments he felt himself tumbling into a soft velvet darkness. But Marcia's voice still echoed in his brain: "... a man who would have his wife killed."

When Owen opened his eyes it was broad daylight. He could see the morning DJ in the booth across from where he lay. A stout man in dire need of a shave was leaning over him.

"Let me shake your hand, Dr. Stanford," he said.

Owen sat up and took his hand limply.

"My wife and I have listened to your show for a long time. You certainly helped us over some rough going with your advice."

"Thank you very much," Owen mumbled, brushing the hair out of his eyes. "Nice to know there's somebody listening out there."

"Oh, they're listening all right. It's a pity I have to arrest one of the few good people on radio today." He showed Owen his detective's badge.

All the events of the last few hours flashed in on him. "Listen, if it's about that little joke about my wife . . ."



The detective laughed. "I know you radio guys are a bunch of kooks."

Owen joined in with his own nervous laughter. "That's us—a bunch of kooks. You can't take us seriously at all."

"That's what I thought at first," said the detective, his expression turning somber. "I had just turned on my car radio when that little announcement about dumping your wife came over the air. I was pretty close to Indian Point, so I guess my instincts as a cop led me over there."

"... And you looked around the highway, but you didn't find her," finished Owen.

"That's right, Dr. Stanford. I couldn't find her anywhere on the highway."

The pieces of the puzzle were coming together in Owen's mind. Somehow Marcia had survived, and now she was getting her revenge by making his life a living hell. Still, there was no reason this dumb flat-foot had to know all that. "As I was saying," he said in his most convincing manner, "it

was just an on-air joke."

The detective was fumbling through his pockets for something. "No, I wouldn't say it was a joke when we have your wife's corpse."

"I thought you said you couldn't find her?"

"On the highway. I was just getting into my car when I happened to look up."

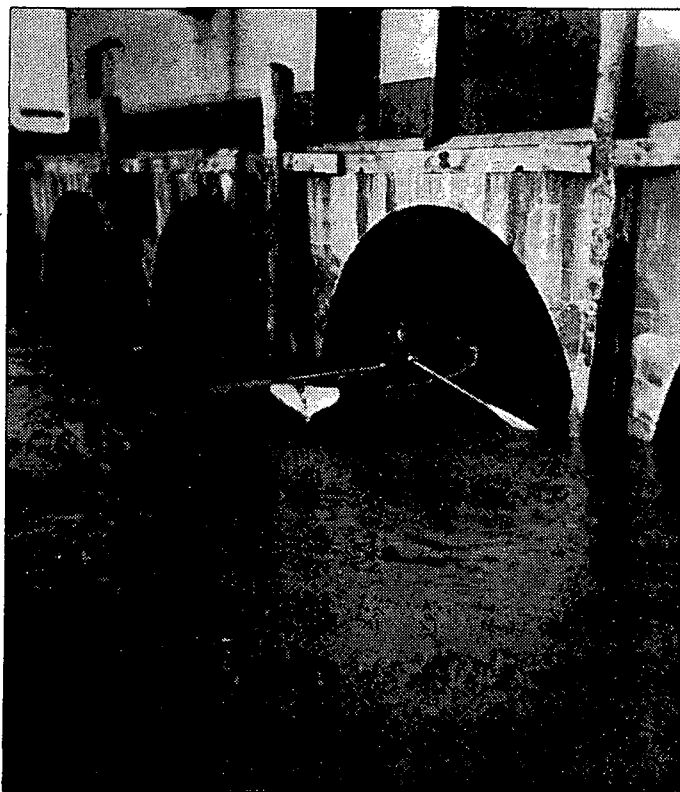
"And?"

"Most people don't realize the resiliency of the human body, Dr. Stanford. Apparently, she bounced quite a bit on the way down. Couldn't believe it myself, but there she was, dangling up there among the telephone wires like a boy's lost kite."

"Dangling in the telephone wires?" Owen's jaw hung slack and his eyes had a dazed expression.

"Yessir," said the detective. "I had to get the phone people out to retrieve the body. Strangest thing I've ever seen." He looked down at the card he had finally found. "Oh, before I forget: You have the right to remain silent..."

# THE MYSTERIOUS PHOTOGRAPH

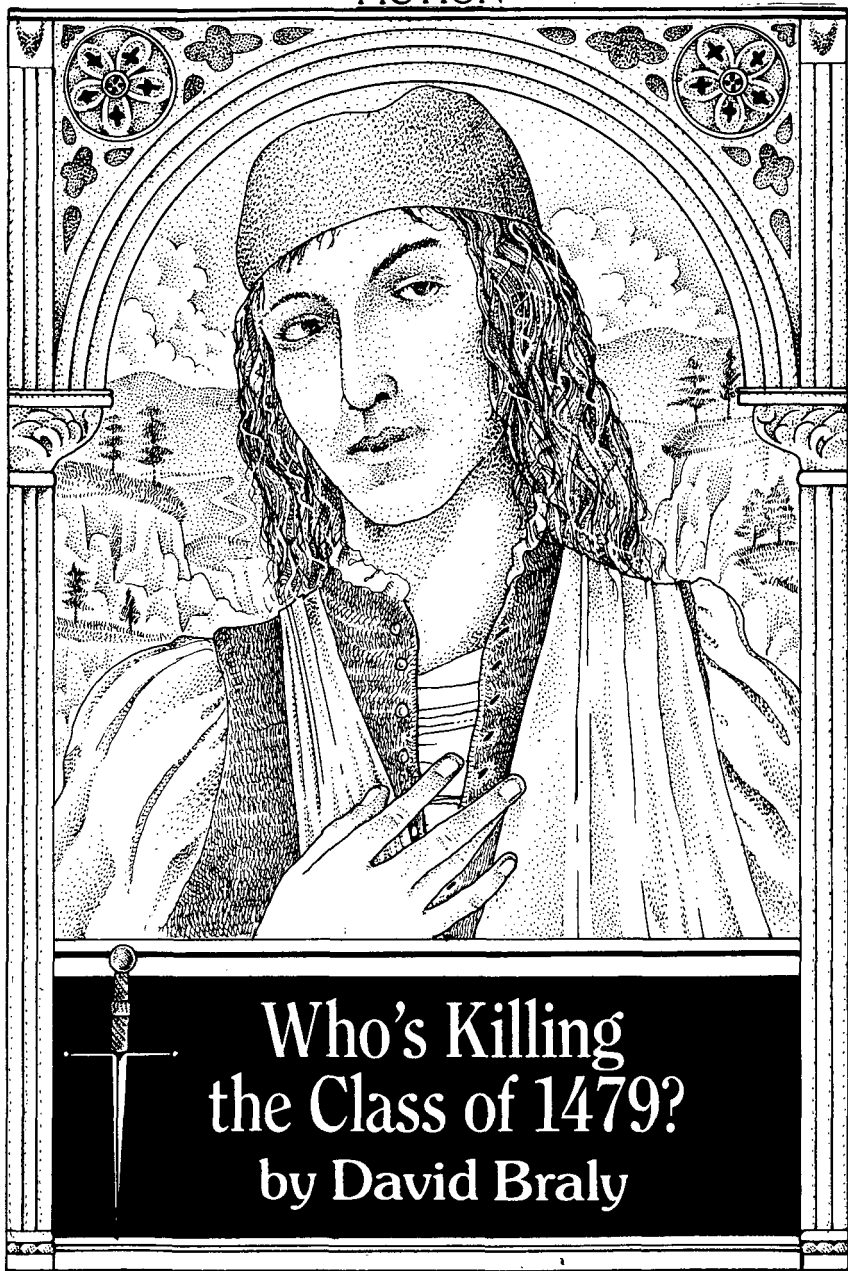


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The winning entry for the September Mysterious Photograph will be found on page 155.

FICTION



Who's Killing  
the Class of 1479?  
by David Braly

Illustration by Glenn Wolff

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**D**ogs and rats were the only ones dining in the banquet hall when Carlo Vossi left. A few men were still seated at the table, a few more standing in the room, talking about business or the latest outrage of the Asinno family's partisans, but no human was eating. Carlo considered the cessation thereof and the departure of most guests an indication that the banquet was over and that he could leave. When he bade goodbye to his grandfather, Leon Vossi did not indicate by word or sign that Carlo was leaving too early. He had, in other words, done an adequate job of representing his father, Leon's eldest son and principal heir, who was absent on business in Venice.

Carlo walked through the main hall and down the stairs that led to the palazzo's stables where his two attendants waited with the other guests' attendants and bodyguards. Being only twenty-three years old, Carlo had no enemies other than the Asinno, and the presence of two attendants would be enough to deter most thieves from attacking him when he rode through the streets to his parents' palazzo on the Via della Scala. Never did he or anyone else anticipate that he would be attacked in Palazzo Vossi itself.

At the foot of the stairs, a side

hall led to a big carved door with two windows on each side of it, each window twice the height of a grown man and covered with velvet drapes so long that they formed folds on the floor. Carlo was approaching this door when a man appeared from behind the left drape.

The man, big and dressed in dark clothes and a black mask, lunged at Carlo with a dagger.

Carlo had no time to move or even to think. He realized what was happening only when the masked man was already upon him.

The assailant plunged his dagger into what he thought would be Carlo's chest, but what was in fact a link of the little chain that held the medallion Carlo wore that evening. The tiny chain was too fragile to stop the speeding blade, but before the link broke it slowed it. Only an inch of the knife entered him.

Carlo cried out, stepping back and drawing his own dagger in one motion.

The masked man lifted his blade for a second thrust. He closed on Carlo and swung down the knife on him. Carlo blocked this thrust with his left arm, which was cut to the bone.

The assailant lifted his dagger a third time but heard the footfalls of someone entering the side hall from the stairs to

the banquet room. He ran to the door, threw it open, and fled into the night.

"Help me!" called Carlo. "I've been robbed!"

Of course Carlo Vossi hadn't been robbed, but his confusion under the circumstances is understandable.

**A**drian della Cle had heard the horses on the Via Ghibellina but had taken no notice. Ordinarily he was the most curious of men, and it was certainly unusual for horsemen to be out in such numbers after dark. If his apartment had been near one of the great palazzi it would have been different because troops of bodyguards often accompanied guests entering or leaving the gates, but there were no palazzi close by. Still, the woman took priority.

Until a fist knocked on his door.

Adrian and the woman both jumped up, she on the far side of the bed and he on the side facing his bedroom door, which led into the front room. They both stared in that direction and waited.

A second knocking followed.

"We're doomed," said the woman.

"Doomed?" Adrian swung around, eyes round. "You said you weren't married."

"Of course I'm not."

"Then what's this talk about being 'doomed'? Who's out there?"

"I don't know," she said. "But nobody knocks on someone's door at night. Unless they're expected."

"Well, I'm not expecting anybody."

Whoever was at the door knocked a third time, harder than before.

"What're we going to do?" asked the woman.

"Pick up your clothes and hide. I'll get dressed."

"You're not going to open the door?"

"It sounds like he might break it down if I don't. Hurry!" Adrian put on his own outer garments except for his shoes and grabbed his sword. He shook off the scabbard and looked back to make sure the woman had concealed herself.

"Wait!" whispered the woman urgently. "It may be my brothers!"

"Brothers?"

For the fourth time, knocking. This time it was less knocking than pounding.

"Adrian della Cle!" called a man at the door. "Please come to the door."

Adrian walked into the front room.

"This is Della Cle. Who's out there?"

"Men of Vossi. Open up, please."

Adrian hesitated only briefly. Possibly this was a trick to get him to open the door. But that was unlikely. Adrian had no enemies except his creditors, and the last thing on earth his creditors wished to do was kill him. His long service for the Vossi kept him in good graces with the aristocratic party; his own democratic politics kept him in good graces with the Asinno party.

He opened the door.

Three men stood outside. The leader was a short man with a grey-streaked black beard. Adrian had seen him when he'd still worked as a troubleshooter for the Vossi. The other two men were private soldiers wearing Vossi livery.

"Signor Della Cle, I'm Piero Yennano. Leon Vossi has sent me here to ask that you come to his palazzo immediately."

"What's happened?" asked Adrian. "What's so important that Leon Vossi would send for me at night?"

"Someone tried to murder Carlo Vossi. The man failed, but his excellency believes that another attempt will be made."

"Allow me time to dress properly and I'll accompany you."

After he shut the door again, Adrian rushed back to his bedroom and began to dress more

completely. The woman came out of hiding and started putting on her own clothes even faster than Adrian.

"Is the man at the door gone?" she asked.

"No. He waits for me."

"Adrian, what's it about?"

"Employment."

Adrian was shown into Leon Vossi's office immediately upon his arrival at the palazzo. The office was the huge room from which the head of the Vossi ran the family's banking, trading, manufacturing, and political interests. There was a richness and quality about the room, even though there were several obscene paintings among the wall art near the master's huge stand-up desk.

Leon Vossi paced back and forth on the Byzantine rug, his hands locked behind his back. He was the same tall, dark, full-lipped man as always, with his long face and long aristocratic nose and his mane of long, rough, white hair, but now he was in a greater state of agitation than Adrian had ever seen him in before. When Adrian stepped in and closed the door behind him, Vossi faced him eye to eye.

"You came to work for us right after you finished your studies at Pisa, I believe," said

Vossi without any preamble.

"Yes, sir, a few months after, in 1473."

"And you did well here, Adrian. You started as a clerk and when you quit two years ago you were . . . There's no tittle for the job, I guess, but suffice it to say that if we had a problem we knew we could usually rely upon you to solve it. But then you decided you wanted to become rich, so you quit and started your own wool trading business, as I believe your father before you had done."

Adrian smiled. "Yes, sir. And as my father before me had done, I went broke. Only in my case, I didn't get rich before I went broke."

"Fewer debts that way, my friend. But that's the reason I felt I might be able to call upon your services again."

"If you mean because I have need of employment, you're as shrewd as ever, your excellency."

"Good. Then you're rehired. Now, to business. You were informed about the attack on Carlo?"

"Only that there had been an attack by a masked assailant who escaped. Also, that Carlo was wounded in two places but not fatally. Finally, that you expect a second attack."

Vossi nodded, then turned

and walked back to the tall desk. He removed several sheets of paper with writing on them from its top, shifted them in his hands, and came back around the desk. He glanced from the papers to Adrian, back at the papers again. He stopped in front of Adrian, exactly where he'd stood before.

"This," said Vossi, indicating the papers, "is a letter from my eldest son Leonardo, Carlo's father, who is currently on business in Venice. It asks me to take special care to protect Carlo because Leonardo believes that Carlo may be in danger. The letter arrived a week ago."

"Does Leonardo say where the threat to Carlo comes from, or how he knows of it?"

"You may read the final two pages of Leonardo's letter for yourself."

Vossi removed the two pages from the remainder of the letter and handed them to Adrian.

Adrian read, in Latin:

*and the lease which he holds from the arsenal. However, he assures me that the whole property can be secured for six thousand florins and no link to Venice will be apparent to the Assino or anyone else.*

*Finally, Father, I have learned of disturbing news,*



*or perhaps it should be called disturbing coincidences. You no doubt remember that last month our secret man in Milan informed us that three noble young men of that duchy had been murdered, all within two days of each other, and that these men had all studied at Pisa until last year, the same year Carlo finished his own studies there. You will also remember that the man communicated to us their names, that I asked Carlo if he knew any of them, and that Carlo replied that all three had been close friends of his at the university. You will also doubtless recall that we speculated the three must have been somehow involved in the attempted assassination of the Duke of Milan last month, since they were all of such noble families and were all killed so cleanly and without any clue as to the murderer and that such efficiency probably could only come from the duke. But it now appears that our speculation was wrong.*

*I have just learned that another recent student at Pisa, Giuseppe Noppo, was murdered between Venice and Padua when he was*

*riding to visit a friend at the university in the latter place. An arrow was shot through his heart. Noppo is a son of Luigi Noppo, head of the big gold trading firm of the same name, and I know that he was a friend of Carlo's because I met him when I visited Carlo at the university last year. I have also learned, because I made it my business to learn, that the Noppo have no connection to Milan nor to the enemies of the duke.*

*Father, it appears to me that there's a pattern here. Four students who finished their studies at Pisa in 1479 have now been murdered by an unknown hand. Carlo himself may be in danger. I commit him to your protection until my return, which should be within a fortnight.*

*I remain as ever your  
obedient son and servant,  
Leonardo Vossi*

Adrian handed the pages back to Leon Vossi when he finished reading.

"The letter mentions your 'secret man' in Milan," said Adrian. "Have you involved yourself in Milanese politics or with people involved in Milanese politics?"

Vossi didn't answer. His face

assumed an obstinate appearance.

"If I'm going to help you," pressed Adrian, "I must have all the facts, even at the cost of learning secrets, your excellency."

Vossi hesitated longer before he answered, but he did answer. "We have secret commercial arrangements with three Milanese families."

"Are they enemies of the duke?"

"Not to my knowledge. They are the Relle, Cumi, and Luazzenza."

"Luazzenza? I'm surprised that a proud and old noble family would—" Adrian stopped, embarrassed.

Vossi smiled. "Would what, Adrian? Would do business with mere merchants? Don't forget that we Vossi aren't like the Asinno and other new families. We are noble. We fought in wars, on horseback, at the head of armies, long before the city came to dominate the country. Our ties with the Luazzenza go back centuries, although the commercial tie is a new one."

"I meant no offense, excellency. It only surprised me that the Luazzenza would engage in mercantile activity. They have a reputation for being reactionary."

"And so they are. Now, to the business at hand . . ."

"I'll need to talk to Carlo and to examine the area where the attack occurred."

"The interview will have to wait until tomorrow. The boy is weak from the blood he lost. I'll personally take you to the scene of the attack."

And he did.

Leon Vossi watched while Adrian minutely examined every part of the side hall near the door. The smile on the old banker's face showed that Adrian wasn't fooling him by this nonsense, for obviously there was nothing to be discovered in an empty room after the activity there was done.

Adrian for his part looked at the blood on the floor and at the print left on the wall behind the long window drape. The greasy print was of a hand, apparently made when the assailant waited with his back to the wall, trying to make himself flat as possible so that his form wouldn't be noticed through the drape.

Adrian looked keenly at each line of the palm print and each line of the fingerprints.

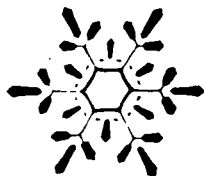
"What're you looking for?" asked Vossi.

"Something in his hand or fingerprints that would distinguish him from all other men. Some sign of a mole or scar. But there's nothing."

Adrian stepped out from the drape and walked over to Vossi.



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"I've been thinking about the letter," said Adrian. "I'm curious why you thought the first three victims might've been involved in a conspiracy against the Duke of Milan. As I heard it, the would-be assassin was a frog-faced man in peasant dress."

"The 'peasant' disappeared too completely. Someone is hiding him, someone with power enough and estates enough to do it successfully, assuming the duke hasn't already done away with him quietly. That indicates a conspiracy. That's why we thought the duke's vengeance might have struck down those three. But when the murders went beyond Milan, and beyond people connected to the duke, the possibility of the duke's being involved ended. But I agree with my son that system is involved here. Coincidence is out of the question."

"I agree."

"You may stay in one of our guest rooms tonight, Adrian. I hope Carlo will be well enough to talk tomorrow. . . . Too bad you couldn't learn anything from the palm and fingerprints."

"But I did," said Adrian. "I learned that the assassin has normal-sized hands without moles or cuts, that he's of average height, and that he was among your guests."

"Among my guests! How do you know that?"

"The print itself. Grease from the feast, your excellency. He ate among you without wearing his gloves, and when Carlo left, he pursued in such a hurry that he didn't take time to wipe his fingers on the bread loaf. Or maybe he saw that Carlo was about to leave and rushed to depart before him, in order to lay his ambush. Whatever the case, he dined among you."

Vossi shook his head incredulously, then looked back at the drape. "May I have a servant clean off that man's print now?"

"I have determined everything that may be determined from it, excellency."

A week later Adrian was still hard at work on the mystery, and he'd begun to fear that progress was over.

At first there'd been much progress. The day after the assault on Carlo, Leon Vossi had provided Adrian with a list naming the twenty-eight guests who had attended the dinner. Of this number, Vossi servants and sentries could attest that twelve had left at least a quarter-hour before the attack. These guests and their attendants and bodyguards had already ridden out into the Via de' Ginori and turned towards their homes. Of the sixteen remaining guests, probably fif-

teen had still been in the banquet room when the attack occurred, but Vossi, his servants, and his friends could only name ten of them. Of the six remaining guests, one was known to have eaten with his gloves on and another to have been too short to account for the palm print on the wall. That left four men unaccounted for.

The four were Flamino della Montea, a Florentine silversmith in his early fifties whose knowledge of classical studies made him welcome at both the Vossi and Asinno tables; Ugo Ricco, a Milanese trader in his forties who had lived in Florence for five months; Gian Coslossi, a Florentine trader in his thirties; and Gian Turra, a bankrupt Florentine silk importer in his forties who had one of the best wits in the Republic and a deep hatred for the Asinno. Adrian decided that the assailant was one of these four men.

Carlo was too weak to be questioned for four days. Adrian looked forward to interviewing him, but when that time finally came he found the young man's recollections a disappointment.

Carlo lay in his bed, a black-haired young man with the large Vossi lips but lacking his grandfather's or his father's height. He moved with difficulty because his chest and

left arm were bandaged.

All that Carlo could tell him about the assailant was that he was big, wore dark clothing and a black mask, and had a dagger in his bare right hand.

Adrian next asked Carlo to recall the time he spent at the university in Pisa. To remember, especially, the four men who'd since been murdered.

"You knew all of them?" asked Adrian.

"Yes. Especially Guiseppe Noppo. That Venetian was one of my closest friends there. Among the foreigners, my very closest friend."

"Who was your closest friend among the Florentines?"

"Girolamo Eccli. We traveled home together when we completed our studies."

"Do you remember anything unusual that happened while you were at Pisa?" asked Adrian.

"Unusual in what way?"

"Did any student or teacher do anything that he would wish to hide from public knowledge or from legal authorities or from the revenge of some powerful person?"

"Can you give me an example of what you're talking about?"

"Did you become aware of or hear about any murder, theft, rape, beating, cowardice, or anything else that could bring disgrace or embarrassment to someone?"

Carlo looked away, saying nothing.

"Don't hesitate to talk," said Adrian. "Whatever you say stops with me. I'm employed by your family."

"I know of no disgraceful conduct," said Carlo.

Adrian laughed.

Carlo looked up in shock.

"I went to Pisa myself," said Adrian. "Only a few years ago, my friend. While I was there one student murdered another, there were two cases of students raping local girls, there was a suicide, and there were numerous thefts, one of which I witnessed. Things must have improved remarkably in the last few years."

Carlo looked out the window, which faced the palazzo garden. Although his room was on the second floor, the trees of the garden were visible and so were the birds flying among them.

"All right," he said, still looking out the window. "There were two cases of . . . misconduct . . . that I know of which were serious enough to lead to trouble."

"Did either involve one of the students who has since been murdered?"

"Yes. One of the Milanese students killed a peasant girl who resisted him."

"Then we're possibly dealing with her family's vengeance.

Were you and the other students involved?"

"No," said Carlo. "He was alone. Maybe because we're all friends the girl's family thinks we had a hand in it, but I swear we didn't."

"What was the girl's name?"

"Luisa. I don't know her last name, if she had one."

Adrian stood in silence for a moment, thinking.

"What will you do?" asked Carlo.

"Have a Vossi agent make inquiries in Pisa about the girl's family. . . . What was the other incident?"

"Girolamo Eccli stole a jeweled signet ring belonging to a Spanish boy. He was a relative of the late Lord Callistus."

"Pope Callistus III?"

Carlo nodded.

Adrian shook his head. "If he had to steal, why did he have to steal from a Borgia?"

"The ring was beautiful. Only Girolamo stole it, but he showed it to all of us."

"By 'all' you mean the three Milanese students and Giuseppe Noppo?" When Carlo nodded, Adrian added: "Was the ring ever returned to its rightful owner?"

Carlo looked at Adrian. He said nothing; he didn't have to. Girolamo Eccli still possessed the Borgia ring.

But who was doing the kill-

ing? A peasant family near Pisa to avenge the murder of a daughter? The Borgias to avenge the theft of a valuable signet ring? Or Girolamo Eccli, to kill all the witnesses to his theft before word of his guilt reached the Borgias?

That was when the investigation's progress stopped.

A Vossi agent in Pisa reported that the father, brothers, uncles, and cousins of the murdered peasant girl had all remained in the Pisa area. None had been absent at the time of any of the murders. Nor could they have afforded to hire an assassin with enough social status to attend a Vossi dinner.

Adrian dared not approach Cardinal Rodrigo Borgia to discover if the clan he headed had embarked upon some sort of vendetta to avenge the theft of the signet ring, because if in fact the Borgias had no idea who stole it Adrian's doing so would tip them. Instead, he obtained from Carlo the name of the theft victim and asked Leon Vossi to make discreet inquiries about the fellow's location, so that a Vossi agent might make friends with him and bring up the general subject of thefts. If the victim complained bitterly about thieves, he would not know that Girolamo Eccli stole his ring; if he smiled and

said something about thieves getting their due in the end, the Borgias were responsible for the murders.

And then there was Adrian's interview with Girolamo Eccli.

"It's false!" the young man shouted. "It's a lie! I've never stolen anything in my life, let alone a valuable signet ring."

They were seated in a small room in the Eccli mansion overlooking the Via de Serraglia. The room contained several chairs and a stack of unused tables and cabinets. A broken statue of an ancient soldier stood in one corner, guarding a pile of old, tattered woven rugs.

Eccli was a fat young man with black eyes and curly black hair. He continually worried his left sleeve with his right thumb and forefinger while he talked.

"Carlo said that you took it," pressed Adrian. "He has no reason to lie, especially with his life in danger."

"Carlo probably took the ring himself. All I know, Signor Della Cle, is that I didn't."

"Listen to me," snarled Adrian. "First your theft and now your refusal to talk has put Carlo's life at risk. If you don't adopt a new attitude, it'll go bad for you."

Eccli paled. "I'll call servants," he stuttered. "They'll throw you out."



Adrian shook his head. "How did Carlo ever become friends with a brainless lout like you?"

"You cannot insult me in my own parents' house."

Adrian doubled his fists; Eccli backed away. Adrian got control of himself.

"Get out!" ordered Eccli.

"I'll go if you wish but—"

"Then go!"

"—first there are two things I want you to think about. Afterward, if you still wish me to leave, I shall."

Eccli said nothing, merely stared angrily at Adrian.

"First, the Borgias," continued Adrian. "If these murders are their work, and if they know that one of your group stole the ring, your life is as endangered as Carlo's. In fact, it's in greater danger because there are more armed men to protect Carlo than there are to protect you. So it's even more in your interest than in Carlo's that we determine what's happening."

Adrian paused for Eccli to speak; the young man said nothing. But Eccli's changed expression indicated that he understood Adrian's point.

"Second, the Vossi," resumed Adrian. "If you refuse to cooperate, and if Carlo is murdered as a result of your theft, I needn't tell you how furious the Vossi will be. They will not be

stayed in their efforts to get their hands upon you. And—well, you can imagine what they'll do when they have you in their power."

Until this moment both men had been standing face to face near the center of the room. Now Eccli walked to a chair near the small window that faced the street. He looked pale and shaken. When he finally spoke, his lips quivered and sweat broke on his forehead.

"All right," he said. "I admit that I took the ring, but I didn't do it for any vulgar reason."

"What do you mean by that?"

"I didn't take it because I wished to profit, but because I wished to revenge myself for the manner in which he and some others lorded their wealth over us. The student with the ring was always wearing expensive jewelry and silk clothes. He was the worst of the nobles. So, you see, I took it for revenge, not profit."

"You took it for jealousy. . . . But never mind. How did it happen?"

Someone shouted outside the window. Another man shouted back. Soon the two men were yelling together, at each other if the words and curses were an indication. Eccli turned his head to the window, as though intensely interested in hearing this street commotion. But the

commotion ended as quickly as it had begun.

Eccli faced Adrian. He wiped his brow with his right sleeve, started to say something, hesitated. He waited a moment, then tried again:

"It happened a couple of weeks before my final examinations. I already knew that that Spaniard had been selected to act as an accuser at my examination. Of course, he had shown us all the signet ring with the Borgia bull on it. So, when I got my chance, I took it to spite him. And he was furious. Not just because of the ring's monetary value, but also he felt it was an assault on his honor. He swore revenge upon whoever took it. He suspected me, all of us."

"Whom do you mean by 'us'?" asked Adrian.

"Three students from Milan, Noppo from Venice, Rohan from France, De Bourgouse from Burgundy, Carlo, and myself. We were a group at the university."

"Was this Borgia relative also in a group?"

Eccli laughed sardonically. "A group of purse-proud nobles who would be torn to pieces by a mob if ever they set foot in Florence. The Spaniard was the worst, with his silk clothes and perfumed gloves and his powerful connections in Rome. The second worst was Juan Garcia,

another Spaniard from Valencia, like the Borgias, but so far as I know not a kinsman of theirs. Then there was Giuseppe Ioli of Naples, Piero Luazzenza, Carlo Longhinini, and the least obnoxious member of their group, Stefano Gaffi."

"Were there fights or quarrels between these two groups?"

Eccli looked up in surprise. "Of course not. We were just two groups among many. Their group was prominent because of their great wealth and influence, but we had no trouble with them until my last few weeks at the university. Then there were some hard words, leading to my taking the ring and the Spaniard's accusation of theft. But we stuck together. The others knew I took it but swore they wouldn't betray me."

"Was there any way—other than a betrayal by one of your friends—for the Borgia student to learn who took his ring?"

"No. All in our group spent a week at the estate of Cosimo del Runnalo, who invited us to come there and hunt. He teaches sometimes at Pisa. Anyway, we were all riding back to the university and were about an hour from it when we saw the Spaniard and his friend Piero Luazzenza sitting under the shade of a huge tree near the road. They were visiting with some man of great ugly-

ness, and from their relaxed attitude I thought that they expected to remain there for a while. When we reached the school, I immediately went to Ferdinand's room even before I went to my own, and there I found the ring. No student nor servant saw me take it nor saw me enter or leave the room."

"Do you still have the ring?"

Eccli nodded.

"Give it to me."

Eccli hesitated, then stood.

"Do you plan to return it?"

"I plan to have it returned, in such a way that the source won't be traced."

"Do you think it'll help?"

"It won't hurt. Besides, you would never dare wear that ring and you accomplished the purpose you set out to accomplish, such as it was."

At that point it looked like the investigation had progressed far, but then two events destroyed all of Adrian's theories about the mystery.

First, the Vossi agent who'd been asked to locate the young robbery victim reported that the man was a victim again—this time of murder. The Spaniard had been slain in his own house by an unknown assassin almost a month earlier.

This murder did more than rule out Borgia vengeance as a motive for the slaughter. Adrian told Leon Vossi that it wasn't only one group of stu-

dents from Pisa being killed, but students from Pisa generally. There had to be some pattern for the murders, yet it no longer appeared to be membership in the clique Carlo had belonged to.

The second disturbing event was reported to Adrian in the same manner as had been the attack on Carlo. Vossi men came to his apartment at night, disturbing Adrian's time with the same woman he had been with before, a woman who had until that night refused to come to him again because of what had happened the last time.

"Never, ever again, Adrian della Cle!" she'd snarled later when she came out of hiding.

Adrian had hardly heard her. His mind was stunned by the news that Girolamo Eccli had been stabbed to death in his own house. Girolamo had been dining with his family when a man dressed in black clothes and wearing a black mask dashed into the room and daggered him in the heart. The assassin had escaped into the street and vanished.

That meant that Eccli couldn't have been responsible for the murders either.

**A**drian shifted his feet. He wasn't used to waiting on Leon Vossi. Vossi normally made quick decisions.

Vossi was pacing back and forth in front of his desk. This time the pace was slow, thoughtful. His steps followed no pattern, which Adrian believed was because of the old man's fear of wearing a path into his expensive Byzantine rug. Perhaps that was ungenerous, though.

"I'm paying you to solve this matter without such risks as these," said Vossi.

"The risk is minor."

"Minor!" roared Vossi, whirling to face Adrian. "Minor is it? Only my eldest grandson's life."

"He'll be under guard on the highest floor of the palazzo, safe from everything happening below. Although we'll send all guards except six to the villa, the three best fighting men on your payroll will be with Carlo every moment and the three next best guarding the entrances into the palazzo. The assassin won't know that. He will only hear that the Vossi have sent all their armed men except three to their country villa, where we plan to remove Carlo for his protection. He won't know about the three men guarding Carlo personally, nor that the assassin himself is being followed by a Vossi agent."

"That's another thing, Adrian. How do you know that we'll follow the right man? You could offer Carlo for bait, follow

the wrong man, and the real assassin could slip through and murder him like he murdered Girolamo Eccli."

"We know that the assassin is one of four men. Those four who attended your banquet and whose presence in the hall at the time of the attack couldn't be confirmed. We'll assign a man to follow each one of them."

Vossi sighed heavily. He walked around his tall desk. When he was behind it, he leaned upon it, his hands flat upon its top. Vossi looked at his hands, which were large and smooth. Then he looked at Adrian.

When Vossi continued to stare at him without speaking, Adrian became uneasy. He was always uneasy in Leon Vossi's presence, but never so much as when the old man's black eyes bored into him as they were doing now. Vossi was the only man who could frighten Adrian merely by staring at him.

"I would never even consider such a plan as this," said Vossi, "if the situation weren't extraordinary. But it is extraordinary. An attempt has been made on my grandson's life. The men Carlo knew at the university are being ruthlessly murdered, one after another, from Rome to Milan, without any apparent motive. I dislike trusting you in something so risky, Adrian, because you've

always been rash, prone to rush headlong into dangerous situations. But I've no choice."

"I assure you again, excellency, that the risk is minor. The safest place in the palazzo will be in the room occupied by Carlo. Indeed, I strongly advise you to be in that room yourself, along with family members who might happen to be visiting at the time."

Vossi stared hard at Adrian for a moment; then he appeared to relax. "Eleanora will be with me," he said, "in the room with Carlo."

Adrian was sure that the assassin would make no attempt on Leon Vossi's wife, but he said nothing. Vossi's eight sons were probably just as safe, but under the circumstances it would be foolish to take chances.

"Are any of your sons staying here?" asked Adrian.

"Only Ramiro and Antonio are in Florence. They are both here."

"I respectfully suggest that they too remain that night in the guarded room."

A sly smile crept across the old man's face. His eyes suggested humor one moment, suspicion the next.

"It has just occurred to me," said Vossi, "that if you were planning a deceit against us there's no better way than this. Trapping us together in the

same room. After all, Adrian, I know that you're in need of thousands of florins to pay off your debts, and that politically you're for the Asinno."

"I support the political goals that also receive the support of the Asinno, but I'm no adherent of that family, excellency. I work for only one family and that family is yours."

"I hope so."

The old man stood erect. He walked around the desk to face Adrian. The big lips appeared twisted and the white hair aflame because of the way they were struck by the light streaming in through the windows.

"I've plans for you, Adrian. You've a talent for solving puzzles and we Vossi have a talent for encountering them. I plan that you'll work for us a long time, not only here but in Spain, France, England, and everywhere else that we have a bank. We'll pay you well, and you'll travel a lot. If I know you at all, I know you'll like it."

"I'm pleased to hear all this, but assure you that your concern is unnecessary."

Suddenly the old man's face hardened. "These days," he said, "every concern is necessary."

"How far do you intend to let this man come?" asked Vossi. "Surely not into the palazzo?"

"No, excellency. The act of

being out at night without an armed friend or bodyguard is proof of criminal intent. Coming here under such conditions is proof that crime is planned against the Vossi. He'll be grabbed as soon as he reaches the palazzo."

"If he goes for the bait."

"I'll bet five florins that he will."

Leon Vossi snorted like an angry bull. "You cannot afford to bet five florins, young man, and the reason I can afford to make bets is because I never do."

Adrian, who knew all about Leon Vossi's often spectacular gambling habits, managed to restrain a smile.

Until Vossi's own face broke into a huge grin.

**"H**alt!" Adrian jumped when he heard the shout. He rose from the chair in the main hall where he'd been waiting, listened for more noise, and then opened the big front doors. The single guard who stood watch there turned to face him.

"Where did that come from?"

"Near the corner, sir. That was Roberto who shouted. I recognized his voice."

Adrian ran down the street toward the corner of the palazzo.

"Should I come?" called the guard.

"Guard that door, idiot!"

Adrian could barely see the tall building's corner in the moonlight and he couldn't see people there. He tried to hear voices, but all he heard were his own boots hitting upon the paving stones.

"Over here!" someone ahead yelled.

Adrian ran towards the voice at the corner of the big palazzo, which was also the intersection of two streets.

Then men became visible in the darkness. Two were facing one, and all had their swords drawn.

Adrian ran up to the two Vossi guards, and found them facing Gian Coslossi.

Coslossi, the Florentine trader, had been one of the four suspects. Now he stood with a fierce look upon his sharp-etched face and a sword in his hand.

Adrian stepped forward, his own sword lifted towards Coslossi.

"Drop your weapon," said Adrian, "or I'll run you through."

"I would prefer to die from a sword than in one of the Vossi's private dungeons."

Adrian realized that Coslossi had a good point there.

So, without further talk and without warning, Adrian swung his sword. Coslossi had no time

to parry the blow to his right arm. The blade struck bone.

Coslossi dropped his sword.

The guards seized him.

"Where should we take him?" one of them asked Adrian.

"Into the palazzo. Then one of you inform his excellency."

Adrian watched the three take the stunned and bleeding Coslossi into the night. He then drew his sword blade across the back of his boots, wiping off the blood. Adrian replaced his sword in its sheath, picked up Coslossi's sword, and walked toward the big front doors of the palazzo.

Coslossi was interrogated in a small room off the main hall. A long table, several chairs, and two broken wheels were the only things in the room. Adrian knew, however, that the room had the advantage of being only a short walk from the door that opened to steps that descended to the palazzo's dungeon. Florence, unlike many other cities, frowned upon private dungeons and this one had never been used, but the Vossi had installed it just to be ready in case the political climate improved. Adrian suspected that if Coslossi refused to talk the dungeon would be tested tonight.

But Coslossi talked.

He denied everything at first when Adrian questioned him.

He claimed that he'd had private business in the area and had come without guards because it was secret. Even after he was searched and the black mask found, Coslossi insisted upon his innocence.

Then Leon Vossi walked into the room with a guard.

Vossi ordered that Coslossi be seated at the table and surrounded by the three guards. Vossi himself took to the chair directly across the table from the prisoner; his face was only eight handspans from Coslossi's.

"Now," said Vossi in a quiet tone, "you will tell me who hired you to kill my grandson and why you accepted such a vile commission and why this person wanted my grandson dead and why you killed the others and why this person wanted them dead."

"The others?" said Coslossi.

"Don't waste our time, Gian. It angers me."

"I swear, excellency, that I don't know of any 'others,' only one other. I—I killed Girolamo Eccli."

"And in Venice you killed a young man named Giuseppe Noppo," said Vossi.

"No. I was told to kill Eccli and Carlo Vossi. That's all. I swear that's all, excellency."

Vossi's face reddened. He half stood from his chair, his big



hands gripping the table's edge so tightly that his knuckles turned white.

"You dare lie to me," he screamed. "Do you realize what I can do to you? Do you realize what I can do to your whole family? You can play with numbers. You think I care about the Venetian or the Spaniard or the Milanese? I don't! Yet you deny them and not your plan to murder my grandson."

"But that was all," said Coslossi. "I swear, only two, even though one was Carlo Vossi. Only two."

Vossi looked at the guard standing behind Coslossi. The guard slammed the prisoner in the back of his head with his right fist, propelling his face into the table. He then grabbed Coslossi by the hair and pulled back his head, which now had blood spurting from the nose.

"What was the price?" demanded Vossi.

"Forgiveness of all the money I owed them. Thousands of ducats, excellency. I would be bankrupt if—"

"Owed who?" screamed Vossi.

"Owed the Luazzena of Milan."

Vossi stared at Coslossi for a long time before he asked: "Why did they want this... this thing... done?"

"I swear, excellency, I don't know."

"I know," said Adrian. "It's all clear now."

Carlo's movements revealed his pain, but he could walk. That was why Leon Vossi sent for him, rather than allowing Adrian to go to him. Clearly Vossi was upset with the young man. However innocently he might have done it, he had brought trouble to the family. Now that the trouble appeared to be over it was time to show disapproval.

Carlo was accompanied to his grandfather's office by one of the armed men who had been guarding him throughout the evening. The old banker ordered the guard to stay outside the door. Only the two Vossi and Adrian remained in the office.

"You said it was clear to you now," the old man said to Adrian. "Make it clear to us."

Adrian turned to Carlo. "When I talked to Girolamo Eccli, he told me about an incident that occurred shortly before you left the university. You had been staying on a nearby estate and were riding back to the university. You saw two students talking under a big tree with an ugly stranger."

Carlo nodded. "I remember that. It was the day—" he glanced warily at his grand-

father "—that Girolamo took the signet ring. One of the students under the tree was the ring's owner."

"A kinsman of the Borgias."

Carlo nodded.

"And with him," said Adrian, "was Piero Luazzenza."

"Yes."

"Remember carefully, Carlo. Think back to that day. Can you know from the way those three men stood whom it was that the stranger was speaking to?"

"That's easy. Piero. The Spaniard was on the other side of the tree. Piero and the stranger had their heads together, as though they didn't want him to overhear them."

Adrian faced Leon Vossi. "In other words, excellency, these young men were riding down a road and saw an ugly stranger speaking to Piero Luazzenza with care that Luazzenza's companion not overhear them. Months later, an attempt was made to assassinate the Duke of Milan. The assassin, described as an ugly, frog-faced man, escaped in such a way that it was obvious that some powerful Milanese family or group was protecting him. Naturally, any family found protecting the man or having anything to do with him would be exterminated."

"The Luazzenza!" said Vossi.

"Within days of the attempt

on the duke, someone in Rome murdered the Spaniard who was Piero Luazzenza's companion of that day. Then, in the following weeks, every person in Italy who was riding in the group that saw Piero Luazzenza talking with the ugly man was murdered, except Carlo—and an attempt was made upon Carlo."

Vossi leaned on the tall desk, his eyes narrowed. "So, Adrian, what you're saying is that the ugly man who met with Piero Luazzenza and the ugly man who tried to murder the duke are one and the same person, and that the Luazzenza are trying to protect themselves by murdering anyone who might recognize a description of that man and link him to their family."

"Yes."

"Adrian, you have done well."

Vossi stepped away from the desk and began pacing the floor. Back and forth, back and forth he went, for a quarter hour. Neither Adrian nor Carlo dared intrude upon his thoughts by speaking.

Finally the old man wheeled around to face Adrian. "Coslossi wasn't the only assassin in their pay?"

"No. They had Coslossi here, another man in Rome, another in Venice, and no telling how many in Milan."

"Then, Carlo, you're still in

danger. We'll move you to the country villa tomorrow. It really would be safer there. . . . Pack now."

"Uh . . . yes, Grandfather."

Carlo left.

Vossi looked at Adrian and

smiled. "Are you ready for your next assignment, my friend?"

"I . . . I guess so, excellency."

Vossi's smile broadened.

"Good. I want you to ride to Milan and have a talk with my old friend, the duke."

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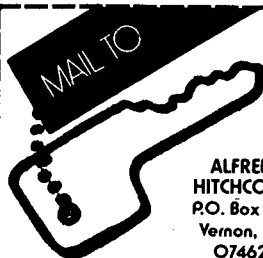
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# UNSOLVED

Unsolved at present, that is, but can you work it out?

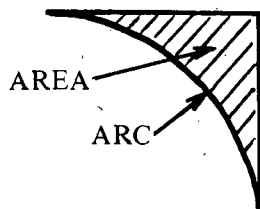
The answer will appear in the February issue.

The old MacAllister mansion outside of Lloydville has stood empty and forlorn now for many years owing to its ghostly inhabitants. To shed some light on the subject a committee of experts from P.O.P. (Pals of Poltergeists) spent a night there one summer. They met five ghosts who locked them in the main hall and would not set them free until they had correctly answered a problem put to them by each of the apparitions. Let's see how long you would have been held a prisoner in the MacAllister house.

(1) The first ghost pointed to the plaque on the wall above the fireplace and said, "On that plaque is the MacAllister family motto. Ten of the letters have fallen off. Tell me what the original motto said."

(2) The second ghost pointed a finger at a spider's web high above our heads and asked, "If the arc of that web describes a quarter of a circle and is twenty inches long, what is the area covered by the web in square inches?"

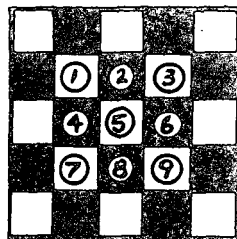
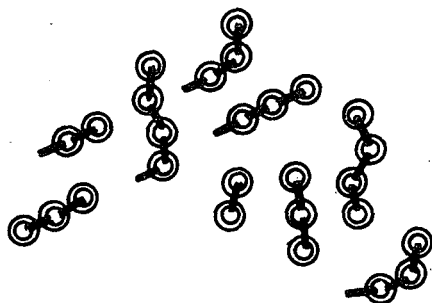
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(3) The third specter pointed to the sections of chain which lay upon the floor and said, "Last night I found these nine sections of chain down in the dungeon. The original chain was composed of fifty links. If it cost 25¢ to open a link and 50¢ to close and weld it, what is the least amount of money it will cost me to have it put back together again?"

(4) The fourth shade placed a small checkerboard on the table and positioned nine checkers on the numbered squares. "You must remove eight of the checkers from the board, leaving the ninth one in the center square. You remove a checker by jumping another one over it to the vacant square beyond. You can jump in any direction using any checker. Any number of jumps in succession with the same checker will count as one move. Your problem is to do it in the least number of moves."

(5) With an eerie laugh, the last ghost pointed around the room at the three clocks and whispered, "Yesterday, June 15, 1974, at twelve noon these three clocks were set going at precisely the same time. Twenty-four hours later the first clock was found to be one minute slow, the second clock one minute fast, and the third exactly on time. If the clocks are allowed to keep running on, losing or gaining a minute each day, on what date and what time of day will all three clocks show twelve o'clock again at the same instant?"



See page 147 for the solution to the Mid-December puzzle.

"The Haunted House," taken from *Merlin's Puzzle Pastimes* edited by Charles Barry Townsend. Copyright © 1986 by Charles Barry Townsend. Dover Publications, Inc., New York, N.Y.

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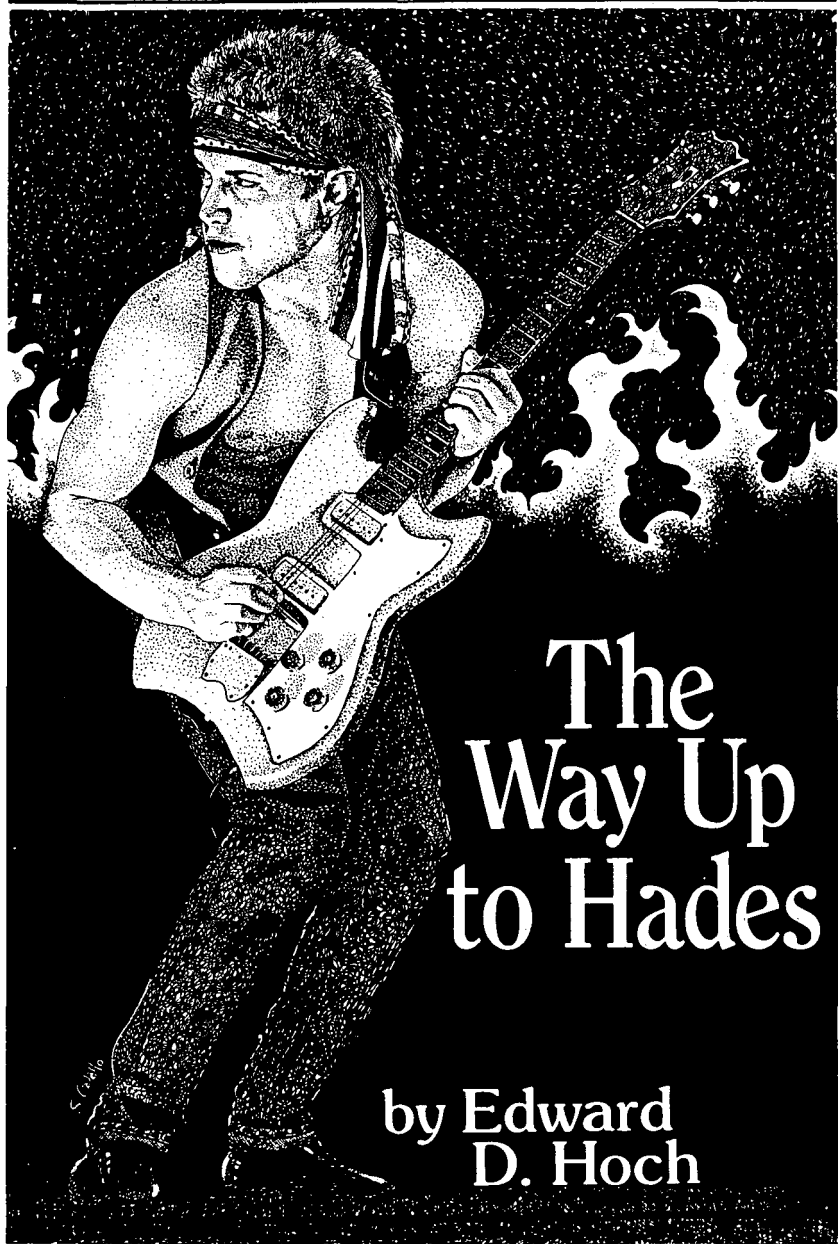


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**M**y wife Shelly has often claimed that I would go anywhere with Simon Ark, and it's true that I've journeyed with him to exotic places like India and Egypt and Brazil. Still, I used to think there was a limit to my patience with Simon. I would not go anywhere he asked, would I?

"It's right here in New York, my friend, at Madison Square Garden."

"Simon, you're asking me to attend a rock concert with you? Have you lost your mind?"

"Rager claims to summon the Devil during his concerts. There is fire on stage."

"Believe me, Simon, it's all part of the act. There are a dozen others just like him, and some a lot better. Why should we waste an evening listening to some punk kid try to burst our eardrums?"

But I went, as Simon must have known I would.

The place was jammed with shouting, stomping teenagers. The few older members of the audience like Simon and myself seemed distinctly out of place, and I noticed one youth drop a hand-rolled cigarette to the floor and grind it underfoot when he noticed us. There was a warm-up act of a hard-rock trio and then after a suitable intermission Rager himself took the stage, appearing through the

smoke and sparks of a spectacular electrical display. He danced around the stage while thumping on his electric guitar, looking exactly like the life-sized cutout in the lobby. Frequently during his act he hurled balls of fire at the floor of the stage, reminding me of a magician I'd seen in my youth. Perhaps rock stars like Rager were the magicians of a new generation.

The morning paper had told me all I needed to know about Rager. Born in London twenty-two years ago with the rather prosaic name of Roger Jones, he'd changed it to Rager when he broke away from a rock group three years ago and started recording and touring as a single. Sitting there watching him for the better part of an hour while he held the stage alone—his back-up singers and instrumentalists concealed by a curtain—I began to wonder what all the excitement was about. Then, as the act came to a gratifying conclusion, I noticed Simon Ark lean forward in his seat. Rager dropped his guitar, threw his hands to the heavens, and cried out, "*Satan, take me! If there is a Lord of the Underworld, let me be with you this day in Hades!*"

Then he vanished in a burst of flames and smoke. The kids went wild.



"I hope you're satisfied," I told Simon as we threaded our way toward the exit.

"I would like to go backstage," he told me.

"Simon, I'm sure no one gets backstage except a few nubile groupies."

He insisted, but I was right. We got no farther than a dapper young Englishman at the stage door who announced himself as Rager's personal manager. "Les Fenton's the name. You got any messages for Rager, they go through me."

"I need to speak with the young man personally," Simon Ark persisted.

Fenton looked him over, taking in Simon's black suit and white hair. "What are you—his grandpa or his preacher?"

"Neither one," I interjected, offering my card.

Fenton saw the name NEPTUNE BOOKS and shifted his gaze to me. "A publisher? Want to talk about a book? Rager's autobiography would sell millions of copies."

"He's only twenty-two. Has he had that much of a life?"

"You'd be surprised. Look, there's a reception for Rager tomorrow afternoon at the Millbrook Manor Hotel in Times Square. Come early, about one o'clock, and we can have lunch first."

A young woman in a black

leather miniskirt and too much makeup appeared in the corridor behind him. "Les, Rager needs you."

"Be right there." He shook hands with both of us. "One o'clock at the Millbrook Manor."

When we were alone I said to Simon, "I have no intention of publishing Rager's autobiography. We're an old-line quality house."

"You can tell him that later. I'd like very much to meet Mr. Rager and this looks like our best opportunity."

"Simon, he's just a kid trying to shock other kids. All this business about Satan in his act is so much window-dressing."

"We shall see," Simon Ark said.

**M**illbrook Manor was a hotel chain that had gotten its start in national parks and recreation areas. It kept the name when it expanded into the cities, and even when it built a sixty-story glass and steel luxury hotel with a huge indoor atrium in the heart of Times Square. Neither the name nor the building seemed out of place in a city that sees everything. Somehow it went well with the Marriott Marquis across the street and the two other hotels under construction in the area.

Like the Marriott, the main

feature of the atrium was the bank of glass elevators which rose in full view of the lobby, carrying guests to all sixty floors. A few of the elevators even continued on, seemingly through the roof, transporting visitors to the Skytop Restaurant with its magnificent view of the city. That was where the reception for Rager would be held to introduce his latest record album.

"Stay for the reception," Les Fenton urged Simon and me over lunch the following day. "When you see the sort of important people flocking around Rager, I know you'll agree the chap is much more than another fad performer."

We weren't alone at lunch. Fenton had brought along a stunningly dressed young woman named Clare Goddard who handled Rager's publicity. She was American rather than British and spoke with a slight southern accent. I wasn't surprised when she revealed she was from North Carolina. "I've been up here five years, but Rager is the first client who's really excited me. The kids go crazy over him."

"They're interested in doing his book," Fenton told her.

"Wait a minute. I didn't go that far." They were ready to sign a contract before we finished lunch. "Actually, it's my

friend Simon here who's really interested in Rager."

"It would be a great book," Clare Goddard insisted, warming to her sales pitch. "And I'm certain he'd help promote it."

"I understand he's quite aloof," Simon said. "Insists on riding alone in his limousine and even in elevators, never waves to fans or signs autographs."

"They love it," Fenton replied. "They love that manner of his."

"At the conclusion of his act, when he calls upon Satan to take him to Hades, has anything unusual ever happened?"

The manager laughed. "What do you expect, some great horned monster to appear and snatch him away? Might not be a bad gimmick, I suppose, but we haven't done it yet."

Clare Goddard tapped Fenton on the arm. "I think Mr. Ark is a believer, Les."

"Hell, no one believes in Satan any more. He's got even less of a following than God. You think Rager'd be doing that act if he really thought there was a Devil?"

After lunch we all went down to the lobby to meet Rager when he arrived. Actually we went to the floor below the lobby, where the cars pulled in off the street. Les Fenton hurried along the bank of elevators, checking the arrangements

for the rock star's arrival, making certain there were no groupies hidden behind the potted palms. I followed him, noting there were a dozen elevators in all, arranged around a central core. Down here in their closed shafts they appeared perfectly ordinary. It was not until they rose above the lobby level that the glass sides revealed the splendor of the entire atrium with its revolving fountain and full-sized trees. There was even a small waterfall illuminated by colored lights.

Rager arrived alone in his limousine shortly before two thirty. There were police officers to keep back the crowd, and we could only watch from a distance as Fenton and Clare Goddard greeted him. As usual Rager refused to wave or acknowledge his fans. He said a few words to Les Fenton and then followed his manager to the elevator marked SKYTOP EXPRESS. He was wearing the same silver vest with bare arms that had been his on-stage costume the previous night. Obviously he didn't believe in more formal dress for promotional appearances.

A teenaged girl broke through the police line and ran up to the elevator, but Fenton waved her away. "No autographs," he said sharply. "Rager doesn't sign autographs." Then the elevator

doors slid shut as a red arrow pointed upward. Fenton was left waiting for the next car. Even he didn't get to share an elevator with Rager.

Simon and I took an escalator to the lobby floor directly above and we were in time to see Rager's glass elevator emerge from below and rise quickly up the entire height of the sixty-story atrium. He stood away from the glass with his back to the elevator door and never moved, refusing to acknowledge the waves from fans clustered in the lobby. "The young man has some ego," Simon remarked.

"It's all part of the act." As the express elevator disappeared through the ceiling of the atrium far above our heads we boarded a local with some hotel guests for the ride to the Skytop Restaurant.

I recognized one of the passengers as the leather-clad young woman we'd observed in the backstage corridor the previous night. "You're a friend of Rager's, aren't you?" I asked her.

I introduced myself and Simon Ark. "We're to see Rager about a book idea," I explained, not bothering to tell her the idea was Fenton's rather than mine.

She warmed up a bit as the elevator stopped to discharge the last of the hotel guests at

their floor. "I'm Susan Yantz. I met Rager on his first American tour last year, and I've been with him ever since."

Beneath the layers of makeup I could detect the face of a young woman barely out of her teens. She had the voice of a native New Yorker and she still wore the black leather miniskirt or its twin. "Are you from here?" I asked.

"Yeah. It's good to be back for a week. We've been touring all over the world—Australia, even!"

The elevator came to a stop and we got out at the restaurant. The luncheon crowd was gone, replaced by the invited guests for the record launch. But I saw at once that something was wrong. There was no sign of Rager and television crews seemed confused. One cameraman even aimed at us as we emerged from the elevator.

"Where's Rager?" a bald man asked, fighting his way through the crowd to Susan Yantz's side. "Isn't he with you?"

"No, stupid. You know he always rides alone in elevators. He's already up here."

"No, he isn't."

"He came up on the express elevator. I saw him get on it myself. Everyone saw him."

"We were waiting for that elevator. But when the doors

opened it was empty, except for one of his fireballs burning a hole in the carpet."

Simon Ark moved then, pushing past me. "Take me to this elevator at once."

I followed along. "We're holding it here until the hotel people can assess the damage," the bald man told us. "I know it's a damn foolish stunt—"

"It may not be a stunt," Simon said.

He opened the elevator door with a key from outside. It was still full of smoke, and a large scorched area was visible just inside the doors where we'd seen Rager standing. "What's that odd smell?" I asked Simon.

His face was very calm, but his words were thunderous. "I suspect it is the odor of brimstone, my friend. Rager has finally had his wish granted. Satan has taken him to Hades."

**N**o one else was ready to accept Simon's assessment of the situation. The bald man, who identified himself as Thomas Robock from the record company, ushered us quickly into a private room. Susan Yantz was left outside. "We don't need that little tramp," he muttered. "There's enough trouble already."

"We were to meet with Rager," I said lamely. "His man-

ager, Les Fenton, was arranging it."

"Where the hell is Fenton?"

"No doubt on his way up from the lobby," Simon said. "Tell me exactly what happened."

"Nothing happened," Thomas Robock said. "We were all waiting here to welcome Rager when he stepped off the elevator. Fenton was holding it downstairs for his arrival. As soon as the light went on showing it was coming up, we got ready. Then the doors slid open and there was no one inside—just one of his damned fireballs."

Simon Ark nodded. "No chance he could have slipped past you, hidden by the smoke?"

"None. The smoke wasn't that thick."

"What about the escape hatch that's in the top of every elevator?"

"This one has hidden bolts that can be worked from inside or outside the car. But they do have to be opened. These were still tightly closed."

"There would have been no time for that anyway," I hastened to point out. "Rager was in full view in that glass elevator all the way up to the sixtieth floor. He was only hidden for the last floor, a matter of a few seconds."

"The people in the lobby couldn't see him, up that high."

"No, but the bank of glass

elevators is surrounded by terraces leading to each floor's guest rooms. Any number of guests might have observed him all the way to the sixtieth floor."

There was a knock on the door and Les Fenton entered. "Where is he, Robock? What's happened?"

The recording executive went through his brief story again. "Tell me it's a publicity stunt, Les. Tell me he'll turn up any minute."

"If it's a publicity stunt, it was done without my knowledge. Find Clare Goddard and get her in here. She's in charge of publicity."

She was outside talking with the press, trying to calm them down. She came in shaking her head, looking a bit less cool and collected than when I'd first seen her. "If this is one of Rager's tricks—"

"You mean you don't know where he is?"

"Of course I don't know," she told Fenton. "If I knew, I'd have him out there with the press this minute. He's had his fun with this elevator business. I hope he comes to his senses and reappears."

"There may be no way back from where Rager has gone," Simon Ark said quietly. They all stared at him. "He called upon Satan to take him, you'll remember."

"He did that every night," Les Fenton scoffed. "It was part of the act. The kids love that weird stuff."

"If his disappearance was a trick," I asked, "how was it done?"

"Maybe he was never on the elevator in the first place," Robock said.

Fenton and Clare Goddard were quick to rule that out. "Fifty people saw him board that elevator, including fans and police guards," Fenton said.

"And I saw him rising through the lobby myself," Clare confirmed. "The elevator doesn't go anywhere but up here. It doesn't even make a lobby stop. It's strictly an express for Skytop customers who aren't staying at the hotel."

Robock pondered for a moment. Then he said, "This has gone far enough. I'm calling the police."

A missing persons report in New York City rarely brings out a detective with the rank of lieutenant. But Rager was someone special, and so in a way was Lieutenant Fisk. He was tall, with steel gray hair and a manner that could change from friendly to tenacious in an instant.

"The missing man's name is Roger Jones?" he asked, mak-

ing careful notes of everything said.

"Rager is his stage name," Les Fenton said. "That's the name everyone knows him by."

"All right. Roger Jones, alias Rager."

"It's not really an alias. The man's not a criminal."

"That remains to be seen," Fisk told them. He glanced over at Simon and me. "Who did you say you were?"

"We came to see Rager about doing a book. I'm the senior editor at Neptune Books, and this is Simon Ark, an author and investigator of unusual phenomena." I made a point of not mentioning Satanism.

The detective glanced at Simon. "You solved this one yet, Pop?"

Simon started to speak, but I cut him short. "We can show you the elevator where it happened."

Lieutenant Fisk took the trouble to get down on his knees and examine the scorched carpeting. He even took an evidence envelope from his pocket and scooped some of the remaining ash into it. When he stood up he said, "This looks like some sort of con game to me. Was Rager into you people for any money?"

"It's no con game," Robock said. "The young man earns better than a million dollars a

year with concerts and record albums."

"Is that so?" Fisk opened his notebook again. "I'll want to talk to each of you individually. Let's start with Miss Goddard here."

He led her into a private room while Fenton and Robock went out to confront the waiting guests. I was content to enjoy the Manhattan skyline, but Simon had other ideas. He spotted Susan Yantz, Rager's girlfriend, across the room and headed toward her. I tailed along.

"Any sign of him yet?" Simon asked.

Susan was beginning to look distraught. "I think something bad has happened to him. If it was some sort of stunt he'd have told me in advance."

"It certainly seems he would have told someone," Simon agreed, "either yourself or his manager or his publicity agent or his record producer. Tell me, were there any other women in his life?"

"Not since he met me," she said with the supreme confidence of the young. "He didn't need anyone else."

"Did he have any enemies, anyone who threatened him?"

"Not really. He got into a fight in a bar in Australia—"

"But nothing here, in New York?"

"No."

"Were there ever any unexplained mystical experiences, especially after his nightly shows when he issued his challenge to the Devil?"

Susan Yantz shook her head. "You're taking that whole Devil thing too seriously. Lots of performers do something like that for a big closing. You know, with lightning bolts and all the—"

She was cut short in mid-sentence by the sudden appearance of Lieutenant Fisk. He burst from the private room and dashed toward the elevators, with Clare Goddard trailing behind. "What is it?" I asked her.

"Something's happened downstairs. He just got a call."

We started toward an open elevator, but Fisk chose the one from which Rager had vanished. "The express is faster," he told us, jabbing his finger at the bottom button.

Simon and Clare and I managed to crowd in with him before the door closed, but Susan was left behind. "Has Rager reappeared?" Simon asked.

"Maybe," Fisk told him. "There's a fire on the lower level, in the parking garage."

The elevator deposited us in the garage itself, below the street level, and we saw at once that the fire had been confined



to a service area close to the ramp. A line of several Dumpsters collected each day's rubbish from the hotel and were in turn emptied by daily service from a private contractor. Two fire hoses led down the ramp from the street, and the firemen had made short work of the blaze in one of the Dumpsters. Now only a pall of smoke hung in the air.

I was still wondering about the detective's hurried trip down here when I saw him approach the fire chief. "Lieutenant Fisk. I was upstairs on a related investigation when the precinct relayed your call to me."

"Here's what we got, lieutenant. A body in the Dumpster. Pretty badly burned, but it looks like a young Caucasian male."

"Oh my God!" Clare Goddard gasped at my side. I steadied her with my hand.

A fireman produced a short ladder, and Fisk climbed up to take a look. "We'll want someone to identify him, if possible." He glanced across the garage and saw Fenton and Robock coming from the elevators, with Susan close behind.

"We heard there was a body," Robock began.

"Which one of you can identify him?"

Les Fenton stepped forward, running a tongue over his dry lips. "I can."

He climbed up on the ladder, took one look and started to retch. "I—I think so. He's so badly burned I can't be sure."

"It's Rager?" Susan asked.

"I think so," Fenton repeated.

She let out a low scream that grew in volume. Clare hurried to her side and led her away.

"What do you think now, Simon?" I asked.

"It would seem that Satan gave him a very brief view of Hades, and then tossed him back with the rest of the rubbish."

**I**t was late in the afternoon, nearly six o'clock, before Lieutenant Fisk got around to questioning Simon and me. "I'm sorry you had to wait so long, but I've been busy following up leads," he told us. The hotel had reclaimed its Skytop Restaurant and the questioning sessions had been transferred to a small meeting room on the third floor. Now, however, the Millbrook Manor seemed to be swarming with uniformed police and detectives. Fisk was no longer alone.

"Has the body been positively identified?" Simon asked.

"It's Rager, all right. We haven't completed the fingerprint and dental checks, but Thomas Robock has also identified him, in addition to Fenton. And Susan Yantz has

described a small strawberry birthmark on the back of his neck that matches one on the body. If she's feeling better tomorrow, she'll view the body, too."

Fisk's attitude seemed to have changed completely from the earlier session. What he'd viewed as a publicity stunt had turned into a particularly ugly death. Now he was even willing to admit he knew who Rager was. "With rock stars," he went on, "the first thought is always that the death could be drug-related in some way. Maybe he was high and set himself on fire. Maybe he had a fight with a dealer over money. We're looking into everything."

"At the close of his act he called upon Satan to take him to Hades," Simon pointed out.

"Yeah, well, that's more in your line than mine, Mr. Ark. There's no way I can hang this on Satan, so I'm looking for a more down-to-earth explanation."

"Have you looked into those fireballs of his?" I asked.

"Yeah. His manager says they're purchased from a magicians' supply house. It's a fast-burning sulfur compound, though Rager was always fooling around with variations for his act. The idea is, it burns fast and goes out quickly, before there's any danger of the fire spreading."

"One of them could have ignited in his pocket, though," I said.

"After he conveniently climbed into that Dumpster?"

Simon Ark stirred restlessly. "You two are concentrating on the death of Rager rather than his disappearance from that elevator. The disappearance is the key to the case. If he was not transported to Hades, what did happen to him?"

The detective turned back to me. He seemed uncomfortable conversing with Simon. "You're a publisher or editor, or whatever. Are there any books about disappearances from elevators?"

"Not that come to mind. Certainly there have been murders in elevators. *Fatal Descent* by John Rhode and Carter Dickson is one such novel, and James Yaffe's first short story, "Department of Impossible Crimes," is another example. Both use entirely different solutions. Ronald Dahl's "The Way Up to Heaven" does not have an impossible crime, but in a sense it too is about a murder in an elevator. Cornell Woolrich's "After Dinner Story" has a murder among several people trapped in an elevator at the bottom of the shaft. Unfortunately none of these fictional situations applies to the present circumstances."

Lieutenant Fisk shook his

head. "A man is seen by several witnesses to enter a glass elevator which takes him up sixty floors and makes no stops on the way. He is observed inside the elevator. Yet when it reaches its destination he has vanished, replaced by a ball of fire. Can such things be, or is everyone in this case lying?"

"The ways of the Devil—" Simon began, but Fisk immediately interrupted.

"Let's rule out the Devil as a suspect for the moment. He's beyond my jurisdiction. Any idea why someone might want to kill Rager, assuming it wasn't drug-related?"

"None," I said. "But then we never even got to meet the man."

"We don't really know Rager, do we?" Fisk fretted. "Maybe if we knew him better this whole thing wouldn't be so much of a mystery."

He was finished with us, but as we were about to leave, Thomas Robock came into the room unannounced. "I have to speak with you, lieutenant. It's about Rager."

Fisk motioned the bald man to a chair. Robock barely glanced in our direction, and since Fisk didn't order us out I could see Simon was intent on remaining. "All right, what is it?" the detective asked.

"There's a great deal of money involved here. I made contract

payments to Rager last week, advances on his next album. I believe I may have been swindled."

"How could Rager swindle you if he's dead?"

"That's just the point. Are you certain that body is his?"

"Reasonably certain. His dental records are in England, but Fenton identified him and so did you."

"I wasn't that sure. The face was badly burned."

"The clothing seemed to be his, what was left of it. He had a birthmark in the right place on his neck. Physically the body was the right size."

"The clothing could have been switched. And you could find someone that age and size any time of the day right over on 42nd Street."

"Let me get this straight, Mr. Robock. You believe Rager faked his own death as part of a plot to swindle you out of some money?"

"It wouldn't be the first time such a thing has happened."

Simon Ark spoke up from the sidelines. "Mr. Robock, does your company carry an insurance policy on the lives of your recording artists?"

"What? Well, yes, on some of the biggest stars. Quite often our projections of sales are based upon the star's continuing to perform and promote the album. Not everyone is Elvis

Presley or the Beatles. If they die or stop performing, they can be quickly forgotten by today's kids."

"Did you insure Rager's life?"

"I think so, yes."

"For how much?"

"A million dollars," he said quietly.

"So Rager was worth more to you dead than alive?"

"Hardly. His records had a potential for making five times that much. If I was after the insurance money, would I be sitting here trying to convince you Rager might be still alive?"

"We'll know soon enough whether it's him or not," Fisk promised. "His fingerprints are on file, and Susan Yantz is going to view the body in the morning."

**T**he disappearance and apparent murder of Rager was all over the TV news that night, and was still good for front-page headlines in the following morning's papers. Shelly knew of Simon's interest in the case, but she didn't ask me too many questions. Perhaps she thought by not talking about it the whole thing—and Simon Ark—would simply go away.

"Will you be home for dinner tonight?" she asked as I was leaving.

"I hope so. Earlier than last

night, at least. I'll call you later."

I had arranged to meet Simon at police headquarters, where Lieutenant Fisk planned to bring Susan Yantz after she'd viewed the body. Simon said very little while we waited, but as soon as we saw Susan I knew the results. She was red-eyed from crying and Fisk had his arm around her shoulders.

"It's him," she said, replying to our unspoken question.

"Come into my office," Fisk told us.

"What about the fingerprints?" I asked him.

"They match. There's no doubt."

Simon had another question. "I saw you take samples of the ash on the elevator floor yesterday. What was it?"

"No bones or anything spectacular, Mr. Ark. Just cardboard. Probably the container for the fireball."

Simon leaned forward in his chair toward Susan Yantz; so close that I think he frightened her. "I have just one further question. This one is for you, Miss Yantz. What vest was Rager wearing when he disappeared?"

She blinked, looking surprised. Whatever question she'd been expecting, this wasn't it. "Why, his silver one. I remember being surprised when he

was dressing for the reception because he'd worn the same outfit on stage the night before."

"He had many different costumes?"

"Certainly. He usually wore the tight black pants, but the vests were always different. He traveled with a dozen or more."

"I suspected as much," Simon said with a gentle nod.

"What has his jacket got to do with any of this?" Fisk demanded.

"Oh, the jacket has everything to do with it. Now I know how Rager vanished from that elevator. Unfortunately, it doesn't tell me who killed him."

**I**n typical fashion, Simon refused to give us an explanation, saying only that he could not reveal anything until we had the murderer in hand. Susan Yantz sat through it all with wide eyes, finally bursting out with, "Point him out to me and give me a gun, and I'll save you the trouble of a trial. Anyone who could burn Rager like that—"

"He was killed before he was burned," Fisk told her. "The autopsy shows he was strangled."

"Has the Devil ever been known to strangle people?" I asked Simon.

"Once I solved the elevator

mystery, it was clear Satan was no longer involved. However that doesn't get us any closer to the actual murderer."

"There's a lot of pressure on us to wrap this one up quick," Fisk admitted. "I'll take any help I can get."

"Then let us have a reenactment of the crime," Simon decided. "Perhaps we'll see something we didn't notice the first time."

Lieutenant Fisk reluctantly agreed to the scheme and the principal actors from the previous day were again assembled. There were only four—Susan Yantz, Les Fenton, Thomas Robock and Clare Goddard—and when we were assembled on the ground floor of the hotel, near the bank of elevators, Simon explained his reasoning for this.

"I am about to demonstrate, with Lieutenant Fisk's kind permission, how it was possible for Rager to vanish from a glass elevator between here and the Skytop Restaurant when the elevator makes no stops on the way. It could only have been done with his cooperation, whether the original idea was his or someone else's. That is my first point. My second point is that the killer had to know of the plan in advance so he would know where to find Rager and murder him. As was

pointed out earlier, you four are the only people in this city he is likely to have told. His girlfriend and traveling companion, his business manager, his publicity director, and the record magnate who was sponsoring the reception he was supposed to attend. He would not have carried out his intended stunt without telling at least one of you."

"He never said a word to me," Les Fenton said, and the others joined in agreement.

"I want each of you to take up the position you were in at the time Rager entered the elevator," Simon instructed.

"I was upstairs waiting for the elevator," Robock said.

"Then go up there—but take a different elevator, not the express one."

Lieutenant Fisk was watching it all from the sidelines with two of his officers. He seemed willing to give Simon as much leeway as he needed. "Go up there with Robock," he told one of the officers. "I want you there when the elevator arrives. Call me on the house phone and tell me what's happening."

"I was with him at the elevator," Fenton said. "Where do I stand? Who's playing the part of Rager?"

Simon Ark stepped forward. "I am."

The idea of Simon's standing in for a twenty-two-year-old

rock singer seemed ludicrous to me, but no one laughed. Fenton went to his side, ready to accompany him to the elevator. Susan Yantz announced that she had taken a separate cab to the hotel because of Rager's quirk of riding alone, and hadn't quite arrived when Rager boarded his elevator. "Remember?" she reminded Simon and me. "I rode up on the elevator with you."

"That's right," I confirmed.

"I was with Les and Rager," Clare Goddard said. "We'd come down after lunch to meet him. After Rager went up alone, Les and I followed."

"Together?" Simon asked.

"No. I believe Les went up first, right after Rager. He had to use a local, of course. They held the elevator up there when Rager wasn't on it."

"All right." Simon pressed the express button. "I will board the elevator. Each of you should behave exactly as you did yesterday, but I want someone to accompany you." I got the job of riding up with Fenton, while the other officer went up with Clare. Fisk would remain with Susan Yantz.

The express elevator arrived and Simon stepped into its interior alone, giving a little bow like a stage magician entering a magic cabinet. He pressed a button and the doors slid shut, the lighted arrow pointing up.

The house phone rang almost at once and Fisk took the receiver from its wall compartment. "Yes, Mr. Robock. He's just started up. He should be there soon. I'll hang on." He glanced over at me and smiled indulgently. No one really expected Simon Ark to vanish as Rager had done.

The time seemed to drag by. A minute, two minutes. How long did it take an elevator to travel up sixty stories?

"Yes," Fisk said into the phone. "It's arrived? *What?* What are you saying? Where's Simon Ark?"

I shouldn't have been surprised but somehow I was. Damned if he hadn't pulled it off, just like Rager.

Fisk and the others stood there dumbfounded, not knowing what to do next. Then from behind us came a familiar voice. "Are you satisfied now?" It was Simon Ark.

"All right," Fisk said. "How'd you do it? The elevator makes no stops between here and the Skytop Restaurant, not even in the lobby. You got on here—we all saw you—but the elevator was empty when it arrived. How?"

"Rager's method can be explained in three simple words. All the rest is mere window-dressing."

"Three words? Where did he go if he didn't go up?"

"He went down," Simon Ark said simply. "Isn't that right, Mr. Fenton?"

Les Fenton would have made a terrible poker player. I knew Simon was bluffing, and he should have known it, too. But I'm not one to judge the pressures of a murderer's conscience. Simon's words broke him down completely, and Fisk was reading him his rights as he got out the handcuffs. Then it was time for Simon's explanation.

"It's true that the express elevator only goes to one place, the Skytop Restaurant, when it's going up. But it also goes to the parking garage on the floor below this. How do I know? Because we took it with Lieutenant Fisk when he was notified of the fire. Remember him saying, 'The express is faster,' as he jabbed the button?"

I shook my head in disagreement. "It won't wash, Simon. The lit arrow above the elevator doors was pointing up."

"Fenton could have fixed that with a ladder and a screwdriver, which I imagine is what he did. He came here to the hotel several hours early, probably dressed as a workman. He unscrewed the face plate from those indicator lights and rewired them so the *up* arrow came on whether the elevator was going up or down. It was



probably Rager's idea, but he needed Fenton to carry out the details."

"No one noticed it?"

"Why would they? The elevator still arrived sooner or later. I'll admit I checked my theory earlier this morning, before meeting you at police headquarters. It was simple enough for me to duplicate the trick, covering the buttons with my hand so you couldn't really be sure which one I pushed. I got out of the elevator in the garage and then sent it back upstairs empty, adding only about ten seconds to its trip. Then I took the stairs up to surprise you."

"You're forgetting one thing," I reminded him. "You and I were in the lobby. We actually saw Rager going up inside that glass elevator."

"Consider the timing, my friend. We watched the elevator doors close on Rager and then took the escalator up to the lobby. His elevator was just coming into view. Certainly an elevator travels much faster than an escalator. That should have told us the elevator had been delayed somehow for several seconds. Rager left the elevator at the garage level and replaced himself with—"

"With what?" Fisk asked.

"—with a lifesized cardboard cutout of himself like the ones in the lobby of Madison Square Garden."

"He was holding a guitar in those," I objected.

"The part over his body could be easily covered with black paper or painted out. Both ends of the guitar could be cut away, leaving a color duplicate of Rager alone. He probably hid it under a car parked by the elevator, pulled it out, stood it up in the glass elevator, near the door so its two-dimensional flatness wouldn't be visible from the lobby, and sent it on its way. He'd coated the back with the fast-burning sulfur compound used in his fireballs. The sulfur was the brimstone odor in the air. A short fuse on the back ignited the cardboard just as it passed from view, and when the doors opened at the Skytop Restaurant only the last of the cardboard was still burning. Again, a test run in the elevator would have told Rager—or Fenton—how long a fuse was needed. They may have tested the burning time of the cardboard as well."

"When did Fenton kill him?" the detective asked.

"Right after he left the elevator, I imagine. Fenton hurried downstairs, strangled him in the garage, and hid his body in the Dumpster with another fuse that would start the fire later. Once I established what had happened, I pretty much ruled out the two women. The killer had to strangle his vic-

tim, a twenty-two-year-old man in good health, carry his body across the garage to the Dumpster, and then hoist it over the edge. Certainly a woman could have done it, but a man seemed far more likely. Robock was upstairs all the time, from the discovery of the empty elevator to the discovery of the body. That left Fenton as the most likely killer, the only one among the suspects with the physical means and the opportunity. It was guesswork, of course, but it paid off."

Lieutenant Fisk said, "Lucky for you he seems to have cracked. Once you confronted him he just went to pieces."

"I think you'll discover the motive lies in the financial manipulation of Rager's various assets. Robock mentioned advance payments to Rager, but I think you'll find the payments were actually made to Les Fenton as Rager's business manager. He may have felt Rager had to die before he and Robock got together and compared notes on the transactions."

"What about Rager's jacket?" I asked. "Why was that so important?"

"At the performance the other night we noticed he looked just like the lifesized cutout in the lobby, meaning he was wearing the same costume. Susan told us it was unusual for him to wear that silver vest two days in a row. Why did he wear it yesterday? Because he needed to be dressed like the cutout again, to make the disappearance work. I suppose it was meant as a publicity stunt, but Fenton turned it to his own ends."

We went away from there then, and Simon and I walked for a time among the crowds in Times Square. "The Devil didn't take Rager after all," I said at one point.

But Simon wasn't ready to admit that. "Perhaps he did, my friend. Perhaps he only works in devious ways. Perhaps he has taken both Rager and Les Fenton. It's something we shall never know."

FICTION

# Deuteronomy 32:35

by Lawrence Doorley



**W**hen word reached Ainsley Yaughner Means, town banker of Battle Grove—population 3875—county seat of Walnut County, West Virginia, that Crazy Bill Grapeseed had died in a squatter's cabin on state

land up on Elder's Knob, Banker Means heaved a mammoth sigh of relief (everything about Banker Means was mammoth, as shall be shown) and said to himself, "Well, that's that. Thank God I'm finally rid of that crazy old coot."

So it seemed, for what further harm could a poor old shrunk seventy-year-old dead man possibly do? Obviously not much, but then there was a Higher Authority to consider.

As a self-promoted pillar of the community, Banker Means was very active in community affairs and seldom missed an opportunity to attend weddings, family reunions, church suppers, and funerals, especially funerals. His funeral attendance was close to ninety percent of all such affairs. And he had actually become, over the years, the county's most sought-after pallbearer, bereaved folks taking a peculiar pride in sending their dearly beloved off into the Hereafter with the pompous assistance of the most prominent personage in that neck of the woods, a rapacious individual who had gotten filthy rich by foreclosing on barely overdue mortgages, by charging interest a fraction of a point from blatant usury, by assiduously procuring valuable coal and timber acreage for little more than the miserably low back taxes.

It got so that folks who had sent their Dear Departed to the Great Beyond with Banker Means, an imposing figure, massive and jowly, over six feet, at least two hundred and seventy-five pounds, manning

the left front of the casket (usually little more than a pine box) actually felt superior to those families who for one reason or another had buried a family member without Banker Means' adding "jest the right smart tech to the lastin'," as they say up the hollow ("holler" there).

And perhaps they had a point, for funerals are important affairs in that part of West Virginia and Banker Means, attired in an expensively tailored black suit, white silk shirt, black derby, and long dark overcoat, spurious sympathy oozing from every clean-shaved pinkish pore, did indeed give a distinct air of importance to the melancholy proceedings which was transferred to the poor unfortunate in the casket, however ordinary, unimportant, even pathetic, he or she might have been in life.

Although poor Crazy Bill had a whole slew of first, second, and third cousins and nieces and nephews, they were all "as poor as Job's turkey," so the county authorities told Willard Gravely, the undertaker, to provide Bill with a cheap box and lay the poor fellow to final rest in Potter's Field ("And they took counsel, and brought with them to the potter's field, to bury strangers in." Matt. 27:7), where in times past indigents from the now closed

county home were buried.

Willard, a jovial little round pumpkin with twinkling blue eyes and a shiny bald pate, rounded up five of Bill's cousins to act as pallbearers and then, chortling inwardly, he phoned Banker Means and inquired if he planned to take part, as per custom, in the obsequies for his long-time adversary, the late William Grapeseed.

"Derned if he didn't fool me," Willard told the Sons of the Mountaineers, an informal group who got together every Tuesday at noon for lunch at the Azalea Restaurant behind the courthouse.

"Not only did he say, 'You're damn right I'll be a pallbearer for Bill,' but he told me to see that Bill was given the semi-deluxe, that's our medium-grade funeral, and he'd pay fer it. How about that?"

"Remorse, pure and simple remorse," sneered Ackley Hootley, who, like most of the others, had a low opinion of Sneaky Meany. "It's his conscience bothering him fer what he did to Bill. That's what it is."

"Now that you mention it," said the young pharmacist at Bailey's Drugstore—he had only been in town for five or six years—"just what was this so-called feud between Grapeseed and Means all about? What started it all?"

Ackley said that it had begun back in the Depression when Ainsley's father, who had started the bank around 1900, had cozened Bill's illiterate father into signing away coal and timber rights to one hundred acres of land for twenty-five cents an acre.

Nope, that wasn't it, insisted Emmett Pollard, clerk of courts.

"My daddy knew all about it," said Emmett. "He and Bill's pa were close. Well, back in the Depression about the only two ways to make a little money was bootleggin' an' singing."

"Singing?" inquired the young pharmacist. "That's a new one on me."

"Shouldn't be," said Emmett, "you being familiar with potions and elixirs. Anyways 'sang' is a Southern Appalachian . . . ah . . . ah . . ."

"Designation," suggested Attorney Elias Scattergood, an oldtimer, held in high esteem by one and all, a kind, honest, decent lawyer.

"Yes, designation, thank you, Elias," said Emmett. "As us oldtimers well know, the word 'sang' is a designation for ginseng, a plant of the wild that is to this day held in very high esteem by the Chinese as an aphrodisiac."

He was interrupted by a half dozen titters and at least two full-throated guffaws.

"Now, fellows, let's keep it clean," he told them, a sheepish grin on his weathered face. "Remember we have a young waitress in our midst. Anyway, to get on with what I was saying, back then, this is around 1932, when Bill was about twenty and eggs were selling for twelve cents a dozen, coffee three pounds for a dollar, bread a dime, prices like that, hard to believe nowadays, anyway, even then sang was selling for two to three dollars a pound, big money. 'Course today it goes for forty, fifty dollars, imagine. Anyway Bill was great for the woods and word got around that he had found a big patch of sang somewhere around Elder's Knob and he was curing it, they hang it from rafters, in a shack where he was living. He had left home for some reason . . . up Dismal Hollow . . . well, this is taking longer than I expected. To make it short, that sneaky kid Ainsley, couldn't have been more than ten years old, just hated (time proved that, didn't it) to see anyone else get hold of a little money. He hired some poor old drunken ridge-runner, I forget his name, to steal Bill's sang . . . that's the story I heard."

"I heard that story, too, Emmett," said Elias Scattergood. "But I think some of us have another version of what started

the feud, don't we, Oswald?"

"Yes, we do," agreed Oswald Easterham, retired postmaster. "Like the fellow says, 'Shar say lee feminine.'" No one laughed at Oswald's pronunciation, not sure it was wrong.

He continued.

"The way I heard it, somewhere around 1942, 1943, about a year after poor old Bill lost his leg when a tree fell on him when he was working at a lumber camp . . . well, to back up . . . there were eighteen, nineteen, maybe twenty in the Grapeseds, that poor woman . . . none of them what folks would call remarkable looking, just ordinary . . . except for . . . for Junie. . . ."

Oswald stopped; an odd hush fell over the dining room. Now what gives, thought the young pharmacist.

"Ahem," went Oswald, clearing his throat. "Ahem" again, then, "Ah, she was the last of the . . . she was number nineteen or twenty, doesn't matter now which. . . . Oh, she was . . . well, once in a blue moon there comes along, among hollow families, for some unexplainable reason, a real, genuine beauty. Junie was one of those. Slender as an autumn daisy . . . with hair like corn-silk . . . shiny . . . big blue eyes . . . lovely face . . . and she always smelled like . . . like

springtime in April . . . you remember her, don't you, Elias?"

"If you had me on the witness stand right now, Oswald, I'd have to answer that I . . . I . . . well, who could forget Junie?" And it was noted by five or six of the fellows that Elias's usually strong, firm, resonant voice seemed to quiver just a bit.

"I enlisted that year," went on Elias, a kind of dreamy expression on his handsome face, "and when I came back home on furlough, I made haste to hurry down to Bailey's for one of those double-decker chocolate walnut sundaes. Junie was behind the soda fountain that summer . . . well, go ahead, Oswald, before I say something foolish."

"Hey, Elias," said Oswald, "you weren't the only one. There's at least eight or ten old bast . . . oldtimers in this room who were crazy about that . . . that . . . oh, she was something . . . but that was long ago . . . that brings up Ainsley Means."

"Boooooooooooooo," came a spontaneous burst. "Booooooooo."

"Exactly," said Oswald. "Yep, exactly. Anyway old J.P., Ainsley's father, was head of the county draft board, and he finagled a deferment for Ainsley. Ainsley had the world by the tail. Had a white Chrysler con-

vertible and all the girls in the county, others his age off to the war. Well, Junie suddenly disappeared from Bailey's, and though old man Bailey, a kind soul, never said a word about why she left, folks soon learned that the dear, sweet, beautiful girl—she weren't more than seventeen—had been put in a family way and . . . died in Beckley while a doc was performing an abortion. . . ."

Another hush fell. Later several of the chaps remarked that this particular informal gathering had been quite different from the usual jolly get-together.

The hush was broken by the young pharmacist.

"You mean," he said, "that Means . . . he . . . it was he who was responsible?"

"There was never any proof," answered Oswald, quite subdued, even more than before. "But Junie had been seen in Ainsley's convertible on the back roads on her days off. Poor old Bill . . . he was away that summer, trying to enlist in whatever branch of the service would take a wooden-legged man . . . none would . . . not even the Merchant Marines. Well, when he got back home, his . . . little sister . . . Junie was dead and buried . . . he went crazy . . . would have killed Ainsley right then and there had not old J.P.



got wind of Bill's intentions and shipped Ainsley out to California for eight or ten months."

"It doesn't really matter now what caused the feud," said one of the oldtimers. "Poor old Bill spent the rest of his unhappy life, the poor bast . . . the poor old fellow . . . trying hard to make Ainsley suffer. I can hear him now, the poor chap, snarling that if it took the rest of his life he was going to make Ainsley pay. Funny, now, thinking back, I can't recall his ever saying just what he was going to make Ainsley pay for."

Someone else recalled that Bill had been arrested at least ten times over the years on suspicion of having committed various offenses against Ainsley, including dynamiting Ainsley's Packard, starting a whispering campaign that the bank was going under, shooting a hole in the front window of the bank when Ainsley was working late, setting fire to Ainsley's summer cottage on Lake Stonewall Jackson, things like that, and though Bill was never caught redhanded, he was convicted twice and spent a total of nine years in the state pen at Moundsville and each time when he came back to Battle Grove his first words were, "I'll git him, I'll git him, if'en it's the last thing I do on this cher earth."

Well, as the Tuesday noon gathering broke up—the funeral was scheduled for the following day—one of the fellows summed up things this way:

"Maybe poor old Bill had a justifiable reason for hating Ainsley; lots of us do. But it's all over, Sneaky Meany has won again, just like he always does. Now he can concentrate on cheating the rest of us."

**N**ext morning, spring, which had appeared the week before in a rhapsody of birdsong, budding blossoms, and warm sunshine, cringed under a blanket of fog and freezing rain, a typical mid-March day in southern West Virginia. The turnout for Bill's funeral would have been slim at best; with the dismal weather only eleven mourners showed up, including, of course, the six pallbearers.

Reverend Amos Stokes of the poverty-stricken Hard Rock Church of the Old Testament, a gaunt fellow with a prominent nose and an even more prominent Adam's apple, tried his best to say something kind about a poor unfortunate human being who had spent a good part of his life "festering in hate and vindictiveness." Several of the pallbearers reported later that Banker Means

was seen to snicker briefly at that remark of the Reverend Stokes, but when the parson went on from there to Deuteronomy 32:35—suggested to the Reverend by the whimsical undertaker Gravely—“To me belongeth vengeance, and recompense; their feet shall slide in due time; for their day of calamity is at hand, and the things that shall come upon them make haste,” it was obvious by the sudden blotches of fiery purple that smote Banker Means’ fat pink cheeks that the passage from Scripture had hit the mark.

The brief, pathetic service concluded, it was time to brave the horrible weather. The rain had frozen to the ground, and as the pallbearers cowered under the pelting sleet while they loaded the casket into the hearse (a 1952 Packard, in perfect shape), it certainly looked as if old Deuteronomy 32:35 had soothsaid right on the button, for Banker Means suddenly slipped on the icy ground, fell head over heels, and hit his head a resounding bang on the back of the casket.

“I’ll be damned,” Emmett Pollard whispered to Elias Scattergood, both of them shivering half to death and determined to beat it to warmer quarters as soon as the casket was loaded. “Looks like old Bill’s still trying to get even.”

By then Banker Means, cursing a blue streak, had righted himself. Someone handed him his derby, the burgeoning bump on his right temple turning a nasty purplish-blue.

“No, I don’t need a doctor, Willard,” he snarled when Undertaker Gravely suggested such a possibility. “Let’s get going. I’m a busy man. Why I ever agreed to participate in this . . . this . . . miserable mess is beyond me. Let’s go, God damn it.”

They got going. Everybody found his place and the little cortege—the hearse carrying the wispy remains, the black limousine (a 1950 Packard)—departed for Potter’s Field, the old cemetery high on a windswept hill four miles out of town, up a long, winding road with a dozen hairpin turns.

Joe Simmons, the regular hearse driver, had come down with a bug and was unable to drive the hearse that morning, and Pearly Poggs, an unemployed coal truck driver, unversed in the do’s and don’ts of funeral procedure but a veteran driver in all kinds of weather, had been pressed into service. As usual, Digger Downs, a jack of all trades (his main occupation was well-drilling) handled the big limousine.

Traffic was practically nonexistent on the highway. Fog

swirled, sleet pounded down, it was an appropriate day for a funeral; cold, grey, dismal. The hearse turned off the highway onto the narrow road leading to the cemetery. The limousine followed. The road proved to be "slicker'n a frog on a fryin' pan" as one of the pallbearers put it. Banker Means agreed, not in those words.

"This road's not safe," he shouted as the limousine, imitating the hearse, began to slide back and forth on the icy road, almost hitting the cliffside on the left, nearly banging against the wire cables of the guard rail on the right.

"Who's responsible for not having ashed this road?" Banker Means yelled. "Turn around. I'm not risking my neck for a maundering old fool who was a thorn in my side for over forty years. Damn it, Downs," he screamed, mad as hell now, starting to pound poor old Digger on the back (Means was sitting directly behind him), "turn around this minute... do you hear me?"

"I hear ya, Ainsley," said Digger, bending over the steering wheel to get out of range and also to peer a bit better through the fog and sleet. "We got snow tires on and besides there ain't no turnabout till we git halfway up the hill... an' quit your hittin' me, 'less you

want me to git us wrecked."

That stopped the pummelling but not the tirade.

"You'll hear from me, every damn one of you," raved Ainsley. "Particularly Willard Gravely. . . . Risking people's lives on a day like this just to . . . oh my God, Downs, watch out . . . you're gettin too close to the right. . . . Wait'll I get back down . . . I'll sue the lot of you."

It should be mentioned that Ainsley was not the only one in the limousine with his heart in his mouth. Just as frightened were the five other pallbearers. And so was Digger himself ("Jesus, even if we git up to the top, how the hell are we gonna git down?" he was thinking as he very tenderly kept one foot on the accelerator, the other barely touching the brake). But Digger and the five other pallbearers, having experienced many more of life's vicissitudes than the rich Banker Means, had learned to take it easy, don't make a big fuss, do the best you can, trust in God.

Upward toiled the diminutive funeral procession, slipping and sliding, the limousine staying about twenty yards behind the hearse. And the higher they got, the more the fog dissipated, a mixed blessing because though they could see the hearse more clearly they also

had a better view of the rocky cliff to the left, the deep ravine to the right.

"For God's sake, Digger," implored Ainsley, his pink face including all his chins and jowls a ghostly hue, "please, for the love of God, be careful."

"I'm doin' my best, Ainsley," replied Digger, making a note to tell the fellows at the next informal meeting of the Sons of the Mountaineers that it wasn't exactly true that Ainsley Means was agnostic.

Digger had hardly gotten the words out of his mouth when the hearse suddenly lurched across the road, hit the left side, bounced back against the wire rope attached to the guard posts. The cables screeched, the guard posts started to bend, the wheels spun, the tires smoked, it looked bad. But the hearse careened back to the center of the narrow road, spun, squealed, and smoked some more, got traction, and leaped ahead, and the back door swung open. The casket—apparently not secured properly by the substitute driver, Pearly Poggs, and not checked due to the terrible weather by the usually reliable Undertaker Gravely—slid out. It mattered not who was at fault, the casket was loose on the icy road, coming at the limousine.

"Holy smoke," yelled Digger

Downs, slamming on the brakes, "God A'mighty." The limousine started to drift backward, toward the wire cables, the ravine. It was too much for Banker Means. He jerked the door open and jumped out onto the icy road, a big mistake as events would immediately prove.

Banker Means, arms waving madly, his sizable body teetering and swaying, a falling windmill in a hurricane, gave a spontaneous performance for a second and a half. Then his feet slid out from under him. Screaming to high heaven (which was of no avail, the dismal weather precluding two-way transmission), one hand pressing down on his derby, Banker Means slid down the steep hill.

Meantime—it all happened in a flash, zip, boom, bang, just like that—Digger had managed to regain control of the limousine. It lurched away from the whining wire cables on the right and slid over against the cliff on the left side, just missing the casket, which swished by at about ten miles an hour, picking up speed with every yard.

Also meantime—it happened in a blur—Undertaker Gravely and Pearly Poggs, having seen in the rear view mirrors the abrupt exit of the casket and its contents, exchanged horrified unspeakables ("Sweet Jesus,"

Pearly; "Mother of God," Willard). Then:

"Keep going, Pearly," squealed Willard.

"I ain't plannin' to stop, Willard," quoth Pearly in a shaky voice.

Also meantime—swish, zoom—dear old Crazy Bill in the casket caught up with the shrieking Banker Means about ten yards down the hill, and as all hands in the limousine scampered from the car, but very cautiously, holding on to it, a sight all swore they would remember to their dying days was barely discernible through the fog. The casket, poor old one-legged Bill Grape-seed at the controls, had affixed itself against the amplitudinous hindquarters of the howling Banker Means. It was noted by one of the more farsighted pallbearers that Banker Means was still wearing his derby. But that was about the extent of it, since the fog below took over and all that was left were dwindling screams. Soon they were gone.

"Well, fellows," said Digger after a while, "ya wanta git back in and see if we kin make it to the top?"

They didn't want to, but what else was there to do? First, though, Digger suggested that it would be a good idea to kind of see if they couldn't figure out

some way of making a clear spot in front and behind the tires so as to get some initial traction.

At which one of the chaps, a dour, skinny old fellow not noted for a sense of humor, muttered dryly that if they all "peed afore an' behind it jest might melt the ice." No one took that seriously, they being all too damn frozen to think of such a suggestion. Digger opened the tool box on the rear of the Packard and handed out a jack handle, a small shovel, three stout wooden tomato stakes.

So, scrunched down against the icy wind and rain, the five stalwart chaps dug into the side of the high dirt wall, using the tools and their hands, their white pallbearer gloves soon turning torn and dirty. It took about ten minutes to accumulate a fair-sized pile of dirt, pebbles, and outcrop coal. This was scattered in front of the tires, all got in, Digger took it easy, the limousine got traction, away they went.

They were rescued sometime after midnight, the county ash trucks having to take care of the main roads first. It had been a miserable experience high up there in the old cemetery, the wind howling, ghosts of poor old indigents hovering in the foggy mist around the front of the cars. As the skinny old chap

who had suggested they piddle their way out of the predicament said on the way down the well-ashed hill:

"Somethin' liken this'n goin' on 's liable ta maken a God-fearin' person outta an athyfst."

"Amen," came the chorus.

**N**ext day the sun came out, the ice melted, birds perked up and resumed their mating calls, excitement ran high. The sheriff and all of his deputies together with half the population of the county hastened out to Cemetery Hill, everyone eager to see where Banker Means and Crazy Bill had finally wound up.

Bill was located first, around nine thirty, nine forty. Incredible, considering the many hairpin curves, he had made it almost to the very bottom of the hill. When found he was sitting up in the casket, the lid having come open, with what about a third of the over-awed viewers thought was a satisfied smirk on his face. But another third insisted it was actually a real happy grin. The last third figured it was merely the way a person's mouth looks when he has misplaced his false teeth.

Under Willard Gravely's supervision Bill was gently pushed back down into the coffin, the lid was nailed back on, and eight or ten husky chaps picked

up the coffin and carried it through brush, snow, and barren rhododendron up to where the hearse was parked on the road. Joe Simmons—the bug about licked—back at the wheel, Willard beside Joe, the hearse left for Willard's undertaking parlor, there to deposit old Bill Grapeseed for the time being, then back to Cemetery Hill to await the discovery of Ainsley Means. It was one down, one to go.

Ainsley was located about one thirty in the afternoon, his shiny black derby, glistening in the sun far down at the bottom of the three hundred foot ravine, being the clue. It was a hell of a job getting the heavy body back up to the road. It required a stretcher, a couple of hundred feet of stout rope, the cable of the winch on the tow truck, and the energetic help of a bunch of able-bodied men. Around four fifteen the task was completed. All agreed that they were "plumb tuckered out."

That took care of Wednesday. On Thursday, Bill, ensconced in a nine hundred and seventy-five dollar metal casket (Willard's donation), with a brand new set of false teeth donated by Hiram Cloksley (they had been around the house ever since his deceased grandfather bought a new pair long ago), was given a real sendoff, the poor little tumblydown, leaky-

roofed Hard Rock Church of the Old Testament packed, excited mourners standing in the aisles and in the rear.

It was by far the biggest turnout the Reverend Stokes had ever experienced. But he was more than equal to the task. Here was a Heaven-sent opportunity to bring the fallen and those who had never embraced the faith close to the Almighty. Thundering and roaring, in great voice, he started with Matthew 14:31 ("O thou of little faith, wherefore didst thou doubt?"), reminding "the puny little turnout of the previous ceremony for our late brother William Grapeseed, God rest his kind soul" that he had no doubt at all that his lesson Tuesday morning, Deuteronomy 32:35—and here he roared out the trenchant part: "To me belongeth vengeance and recompense; their feet shall slide in due time"—had fallen on deaf, nay, doubting ears. But what of now, oh ye doubters, what of now?

He went on like that for over an hour, his Adam's apple bulging, the gist being that what had happened on Cemetery Hill should be a warning to all backsliders, all those who had fallen away from the Holy Scripture. Get back in God's Holy Grace before it is too late.

After that an impressive cortege, considering the indisput-

ably lowly position in life of the deceased—there were twelve cars, four pickups, Herman Beaver's big red tow truck, and, of course, the two funeral vehicles—departed for Potter's Field, but not before Willard and Elias Scattergood had given grave consideration to paying for a plot for Bill in the well-kept cemetery north of town. They finally agreed that Bill would not have been happy there, too many fourflushers.

Ainsley was buried on Friday morning. Everyone thought that, considering the condition of the body when brought up from the ravine, Willard "did hisself proud." Of course the pastor of the richest church in town eulogized Ainsley to high heaven. But no one snickered, consideration being felt for the widow, a meek, nervous creature who had been made to toe a mighty strict line all through the marriage.

Naturally, Ainsley's funeral outdid that of Bill's, but the talk around town was all in favor of Bill, he having emerged as a hero, a fellow to admire, one who never quit, never gave up; good old Bill, yes sir.

**A** year has gone by since the above events. The widow Means, word has it, who retired to Florida—there were no children—has blossomed into a pretty



damn good looking woman. Further word is that she is being sparked by a retired minister, a widower. The bank, sold at a reasonable price to the employees by the widow, is doing well, repossessions are down, the interest rate also, the rate charged for loans.

But the most astonishing result of Grapeseed's Revenge, as the extraordinary happening has come to be known, has been the enormous increase in the number of worshippers who religiously attend, never miss, the services of the Hard Rock Church of the Old Testament. Collections have improved ("Praise the Lord," exclaims the jubilant Reverend Stokes a dozen times a day) to the extent that the church roof has been repaired, it has been painted inside and out, twenty new pews have been purchased, and next week an expert organ tuner is coming from Pittsburgh to pump new life into the old organ. And right now Reverend Stokes is seriously considering trading

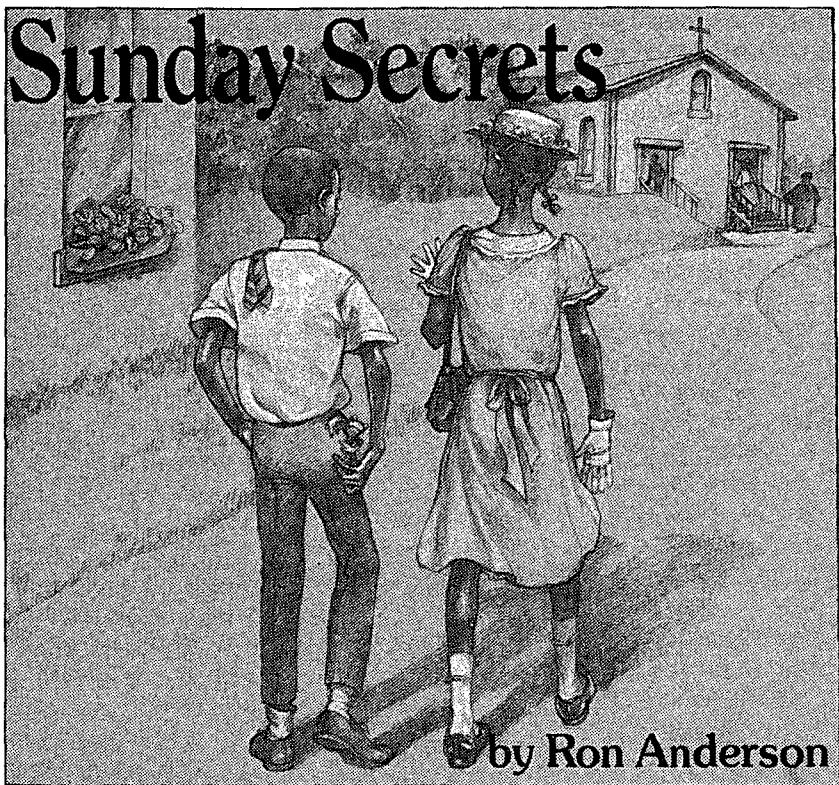
in his 1972 Buick; it has 87,654 miles on it. He's looking at a secondhand Olds 88 with only 27,402 miles which the dealer is holding for \$3675, not counting the six percent discount accorded to men of the cloth.

Of course none of the former backsliders who are now devout, semi-devout—but they go all the time—worshippers has admitted to being brought up short by the unnatural manner in which Banker Means went to his Final Judgment. But deep down, each and every one is keeping a sharp eye out for banana peels, oily spots, recently waxed floors such as at the American Legion hall on bingo night. And of course winter hazards are of prime concern. For it has been indelibly etched on one and all that Deuteronomy 32:35 speaks of THEIR FEET ("their feet shall slide in due time.").

So if there is a lesson to be learned from all of this it is: backsliders, beware, *watch your step*.

FICTION

# Sunday Secrets



by Ron Anderson

**F**ast Freddie was going to get either killed or hurt so badly he'd wish he was dead. He wasn't in the least bit worried, the guy is oblivious to what's going on around him.

It all started the first Sunday of last month when Reverend Jones made his monthly visit to Beal. He has four churches, two in South Carolina and two across the border in Georgia. I like to spend Sundays reading, working on my projects and experiments, but Granny usually manages to find me. I'm usually deep in concentration when she yells, "Get your four-eyed, buck-tooth, brown fanny to church! You're not going to come up heathen!" That, along with each word gesticulated with her walking stick high in the air, is all the persuasion a nine-year-old needs to get up and out. I calculated it takes five minutes for her to reach me, so I can usually wrap up what I'm doing. The first whoosh of the stick is meant for

a warning. Sometimes I suspect Granny holds herself back so she never quite reaches me. One time I delayed too long and the whoosh went right over my head. I went into a dive and roll, got up, backed away, books, papers, eyeglasses, and microscope flying everywhere. Granny howled with laughter and talked about it for a year. Granny hasn't gone to church in three years, since she and Reverend Jones had a falling out about something. I don't know what it was about, but I do remember Granny saying to Mom that it was scandalous.

My sister Mollie and I left early that day to catch Sunday school before the main service. Mollie had Granny's direct, abrasive approach and seemed to fear neither man nor beast. The only thing Mollie is afraid of is frogs. When Mollie is around, I keep one in my pocket or close by so that if she gets upset I can pull it out and pet it. Mollie keeps her distance.

There is only one short business street in Beal and the church is at the far end of it. Mollie and I walked along the sidewalk; Mollie was peaceful. I walked my usual walk, Mollie says it is a bop. I don't care how it looks as long as I'm comfortable. I cut my eyes toward Mollie frequently to make sure I could pick up any mood change. Mom had given us a dollar, so we stopped by Miss Mary's grocery store for change. We could split the dollar and both have something for the collection. Miss Mary was her usual surly self.

"You children going to buy anything or did you come in here to steal? Everybody's getting stuff on credit, and I can't afford your thievin'. I don't make no profit on givin' change. I can't even pay my electric bill this month. The whole world comes down to beg, borrow, or steal!"

Mollie cut loose. "Miss Mary, you been cheatin' and stealin' all your life, so's you think everybody's like you. You ain't nothing but..."

Miss Mary knew Mollie's reputation, but she has handled tough customers for years and brought up four boys by herself. When she came charging out from behind the counter, I left the store quickly. Mollie stood her ground. I heard shouts and curses, and by the time Mollie caught up with me her mood had darkened and I had to whip out the frog for the rest of the trip. We got to Sunday school just ahead of Fast Freddie.

Fast Freddie does not sleep on Friday and Saturday nights. He dances most of the night at several clubs and then runs to parties. If no one is throwing one, he does, and all the kids love to go to

Fast Freddie's parties because he dances, laughs, and talks non-stop. His parties run through early morning and all day. No one knows how he can afford it, although it is said he does pretty good selling grooming and beauty supplies. Freddie has never been known to come out on the short end of a deal. His sister says the only time Freddie was cheated was when he made the deal on good looks. What he lacked in looks, he made up in sharp clothes and charm. He has a way of making people around him feel better.

Fast Freddie was always still up Sunday mornings and came to church early to play the piano. That Sunday some of the sisters arrived early to prepare for a social and got huffy when they heard some rather unholy chords being coaxed out of the piano while Fast Freddie smiled with fingers extended, right ear turned toward the keyboard and knees jumping to the beat. That was the Sunday Fast Freddie was probably going to get killed for, or at least hurt badly if he was lucky.

It happened while the collection basket was being passed. Beal is populated by hardworking, decent folk, but during this time of year before harvest, nobody has any extra money except Mr. Brown and Mr. Harris, who work at the plant, and Mr. and Mrs. Wallace, who are both schoolteachers. Lamont always has money from his trips to big cities, and no one knows how he gets it. No one wants to know much about Lamont because they say he's dangerous. Lamont always sends his brother Harry to church with money to put into the collection basket. That particular Sunday he sent a fifty dollar bill. Well, in Beal that represents a fortune. Harry, singing louder than usual, dropped it into the basket with much flair as the deacon's eyes widened. I sat to Miss Mary's right as I usually do because she is fat and gets hot easily and I can always depend on her to fan fast enough to cool both of us. Freddie was directly in front of me and Mollie sat to my right. The rhythm was picking up with a steady whump-pah, whump-pah, whump-pah. Fast Freddie always gets excited first and wants to jump and shout but cuts his eyes back constantly at Miss Mary with a slight turn of his head so he can see over his left shoulder. He looked quickly at Miss Mary, who is customarily expected to begin the shouting, as the collection basket with the fifty dollar bill was coming down toward her and well within his range. Suddenly Miss Mary got excited and jumped up shouting as she swung her meaty right arm toward me, knocking me off the bench onto the floor. That was Freddie's signal, so he began. Mollie sat quietly as usual. I picked up my glasses and frog, climbed back onto the bench, and glanced

down at the end of the row. The deacon stood with wide eyes because the fifty dollar bill had simply disappeared. Harry went back to Lamont and told him about what had happened. Lamont said he knew Fast Freddie took the fifty and that he would take care of it, which made Harry jittery because he knows how dangerous his brother is. Someday I'm going to be a lawyer and I thought Fast Freddie might need a little help. I approached Harry in the school playground.

Walking up to talk to Harry takes a little planning. If you're too quiet, he jumps at the first word, and then it's hard to get his attention. I sang a line from the current popular song, coughed, and did a little dance step as I approached. Harry had tears of laughter in his eyes and was doubled over but I didn't mind, as long as I could get his attention.

"Harry, the word is out Lamont is going to get Fast Freddie. I know you can't say anything about it, but just suppose Fast Freddie didn't take the fifty?"

After a decent pause to allow Harry to get serious, I continued.

"Fifty dollars is hardly worth hurting a man for." (I didn't want to come out and say "killing.") "Especially if the man didn't do it."

Harry knew the whole town had Fast Freddie tried and convicted. He said, "If Fast Freddie didn't do it, who did? Mollie? Miss Mary? You, Alfred? You grab that fifty?"

"Harry, you know I wouldn't take it. Mollie is mean, but I don't think she would. I have a plan that may help you be sure if Fast Freddie took the fifty, and if we can pin him down on it, we can make him pay it back rather than . . . hurt him."

I proceeded to show what kind of trouble Lamont would make for himself, with this being a small town and all, and how things would be different here than in the big cities where he works. I revealed my plan. Talk Lamont into giving another fifty dollar bill for the collection to use as "bait" money. I would arrange with the deacon to get the fifty back if he asked for it. The deacon could be trusted to keep it quiet, and we could use his eyes in order to catch the thief. They all asked the same question. "You don't really think the thief will try the same thing twice, knowing we'll all be watching like hawks, do you?" I assured them a little confusion would break out and that's probably when the thief would make the move. I did not elaborate.

The next first Sunday arrived and we were prepared to lay the trap for sticky fingers. Reverend Jones opened the service, starting slowly as usual, preparing to gradually build the emotions until



they reached a frenzy. Already his white shirt was a dull gray from perspiration. The happy spiritual began with a clap-dah, clap-dah, clap-dah, and Fast Freddie, seated in front of me, began wiggling his shoulders and glancing back at Miss Mary as usual. The deacon brought the basket down to our row with the fifty dollar bill planted by Harry. I had to time the disturbance just right. Now! Mollie jumped up with a bloodcurdling scream and commenced what looked like an Indian rain dance. Fast Freddie, who had been glancing over his left shoulder waiting for his cue from Miss Mary, was caught unprepared for Mollie's scream behind his right shoulder and sat paralyzed with shock. Suspects one and two accounted for so far. I caught a movement to my left and dropped to my knees as Miss Mary's fat arm whiffed over my head, which popped up like a periscope swiveling to survey the action. Mollie still dancing and screaming, Fast Freddie still staring paralyzed. Miss Mary's arm whipped back, my head ducking under and looking up at the blur of fingers racing by . . . without the fifty. Up periscope, swivel, Mollie still dancing and screaming, Miss Mary sitting still and rolling her eyes at Mollie, remembering their confrontation and knowing Mollie could not be sincere, she had to be faking it. Fast Freddie was still paralyzed. The deacon stood at the end of the row with eyes as big as saucers, even bigger than the last time. I eased back into my seat, craning my neck to see the collection basket, and was shocked to see not one but two fifty dollar bills. Suddenly it was quite clear. Miss Mary's words back at her store, "The world has come to beg, borrow, or steal." I wonder if she considered herself borrowing or stealing the fifty. At least she paid it back.

Miss Mary is going to get awfully upset when she gets my anonymous letter explaining that her tricky business was observed and so don't try it again. She'll end up spending another seventy-five dollars that she tried to collect from my parents for doctor bills when Mollie upset her, and she is going to be a little embarrassed at showing her face around town for a while.

Lamont won't have to deal with Fast Freddie. Fast Freddie will go on being Fast Freddie, that's a fact. Mollie? Well, ever since Mollie did her scream and dance, people around town have looked at her in a different light. They swear she has religion and is a new person. Mollie is getting more attention than she has all her life, and for the first time has a little self-esteem. She carries herself like a little lady. And best of all, she never told anyone that on one particular Sunday, timing it just right, I threw my frog right into her lap.

FICTION

# A Class Act

by Lyn Peters

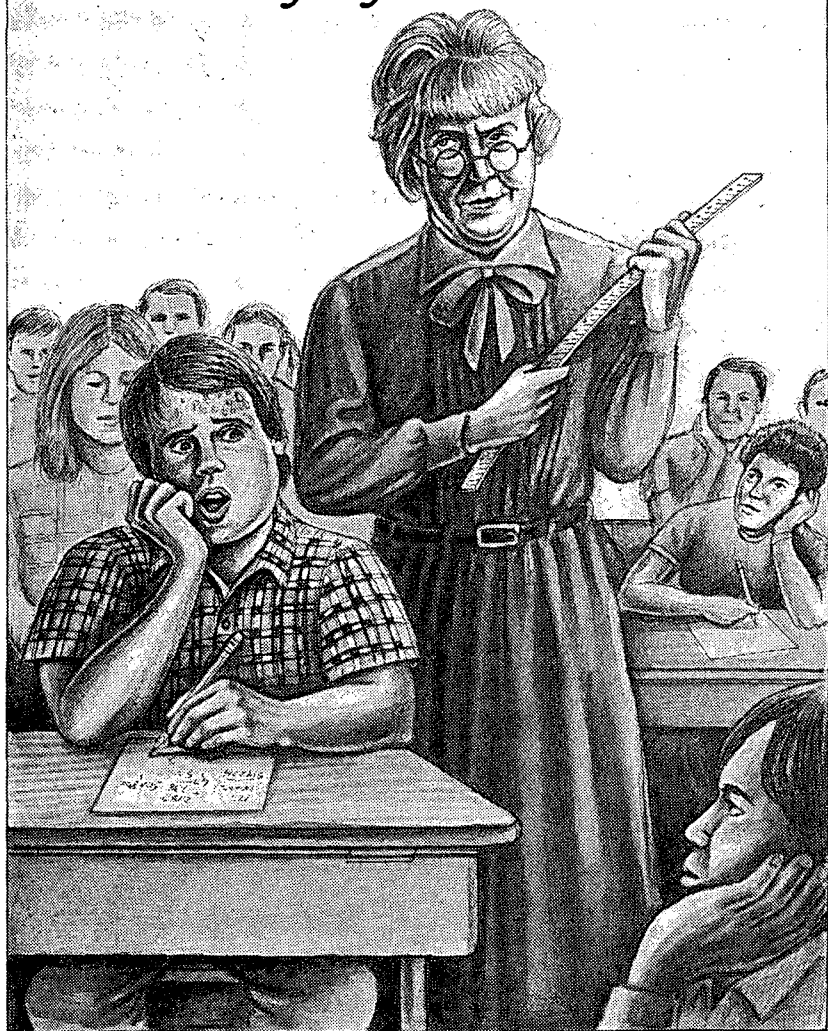


Illustration by Peter D. Fasolino

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**T**he day was hot, too hot to find comfort anywhere but skinny-dipping in Carter's Creek, or lying in the shade of a big old oak. It was too hot to be expected to sit quietly in that stuffy little box of a room and concentrate on sums and such. But Miss Abigail Hornfellow stood before us, dressed in her customary long-sleeved black dress and heavy black stockings, expecting us to do just that, concentrate.

Jimmy Bufort, a heavyset boy with the great misfortune of being one of Miss Hornfellow's least favorite students of all time, was having an especially hard time that day coming up with the correct answer to a problem he'd been told to solve.

"Concentrate, Mr. Bufort," Miss Hornfellow demanded, when he'd stammered out an incorrect answer. "Concentrate!"

Jimmy tried to oblige. Straining and sweating, he bent over his paper and laboriously worked through the problem again. With obvious relief, he supplied an answer, different from the first, believing it to be correct. It was not. Miss Hornfellow promptly informed him that he was either not trying hard enough, or he was indeed as stupid as she suspected. Miss Hornfellow said she was rather inclined to believe the latter.

We all felt bad for Jimmy, he was trying so hard and Miss Hornfellow and the heat were not making things any easier for him.

"Again, Mr. Bufort," she demanded, "you shall do the sums again and again until you give me the correct response. In the meantime, your classmates will suffer at your hand, no one will be allowed to move, until you have supplied us with the correct answer. If, Mr. Bufort, that means your classmates will be forced to miss their recess period, they will have you to thank."

Jimmy bent closer to his paper, trying to hide his tears of shame and frustration. Sums had always been dreadfully difficult for him. Try as he might to keep the figures in neat, manageable rows, they just wouldn't stay that way. A fourteen would somehow turn itself around into a forty-one, his columns would stray and cause him confusion, his papers would always turn into jumbled messes. Poor Jimmy, we all tried to help him out, after school and during recess, tried to make things easier on him. But Jimmy just couldn't catch on no matter what we did. It wasn't his fault, he couldn't help it. Miss Hornfellow didn't understand Jimmy's dilemma; she believed he was too lazy to try. To make matters worse, counting on fingers was not allowed in class. Miss Hornfellow believed anyone who'd reached the age of twelve should surely be capable of doing simple

additions and subtractions in their heads and not need the assistance of their fingers. A lot of us had trouble with sums and, in spite of what she said, needed that little extra help from our fingers. Most of us had been caught at some point during that year, using our fingers to count, and had received a sharp rap on the knuckles with the long, stiff ruler she always carried with her. Jimmy got hit more than the rest of us that year, most every day as a matter of fact. Things were already going so badly for him on that day in June that Jimmy didn't want to make matters worse by counting on his fingers. That added to his troubles, though, because he wasn't even coming close to the right answer.

After what seemed like an awfully long time, Jimmy came out with a third answer. This one even he knew was wrong, but he'd become desperate to say something, anything. By that time the tension in the room had become almost as bad as the heat. Jimmy was really in for it, but so were the rest of us. Miss Hornfellow believed strongly in mass punishment, and dealt it out often.

"It appears, class," she said, "that Mr. Bufort is not satisfied with merely wasting our time, he now wishes to imply that we are, each of us, fools. Is that so Mr. Bufort, do you wish to make us all appear foolish?"

"No, ma'am," Jimmy choked, "I just can't seem to do this."

I had to give him credit, he was holding himself real well, considering the circumstances. I don't know if I could have even made myself able to talk at all. Still, he should have known better than to say he couldn't do the sums.

"Is that so?" She shook her head and tapped her stick on the desktop. Miss Hornfellow was just about out of patience. "There is nothing the human mind cannot accomplish," she hissed. "I will not hear 'I can't,' I will not hear it, is that understood?"

"Yes, ma'am," we answered in unison as we were expected to and waited for what would happen next.

Each of us was thinking about how we felt when Miss Hornfellow singled us out for her special attention. It was awful. Nothing in any of our previous school experiences had prepared us for her wrath, and not one of us had escaped it during that long, hateful year. The only good thing that did come of those months we spent together in that drab, cell-like room was that we developed among us a special sort of kinship, a meeting of the minds if you will. It sounds crazy, I know, but it did exist. Rather than feeling any anger toward Jimmy for placing us all in such a bad position, as

might be expected, we felt protective of him, and wanted to find a way to stop his torment.

Rachel Cummings, seated on Jimmy's right, considered whispering the answer to him, but she didn't because she knew it would only make matters worse. Miss Hornfellow would have heard, and both of them would have been called out for cheating. In Miss Hornfellow's class, cheating was considered one of the worst possible offenses, and everyone involved received an automatic paddling. Rachel had already been paddled four or five times that year, and she didn't want to find herself in that position again. I can't say I blame her for thinking that way, we all felt pretty much the same.

When Jimmy looked up from his paper, his round, fat face flushed, his chin quivering, we all knew he still didn't have the right answer. It was pitiful, knowing he believed he finally had it.

As I said, there was something between us all. I know how it sounds, but we could feel each other's thoughts. We couldn't "read" them, like you see in movies and books, but we could feel them.

Of course, all of us were concentrating on the right answer, hoping Jimmy would be able to pick up on it, as he was sometimes able to do with history and English, but that block of his, it just wouldn't seem to let anything through about sums.

Jimmy blurted out his answer, and Miss Hornfellow sighed with disgust. We could see she'd been pushed beyond her breaking point.

"This class, on the whole, has been a bitter disappointment to me," she announced coldly. "Not one of you has learned the single most important element necessary to becoming successful and productive human beings. You are, every one, a disgrace to yourselves and to your school."

She walked stiffly toward the back of the room, where three small windows stood open, allowing a light but welcome breeze into the room. One by one, she slid those windows shut and locked them. Immediately the temperature in the room seemed to soar.

"Now," she said with grim satisfaction, when she'd returned to her place at the front of the room, "we shall have a lesson in concentration. This will, perhaps, be the most valuable lesson in your lives, you will thank me for this in time."

The heat in there had become so great all of us were beginning to feel ill, all but her. Miss Hornfellow looked just as cool as always, not a drop of sweat on her.

"Mr. Bufort will continue to search for the correct answer to our

simple sum," she announced, "and until he finds it, we shall remain exactly as we are. However, I cannot justify allowing your minds to sit idle during this period of time, and so we shall take full advantage of our unfortunate situation."

Mary Sue Davis made small gagging noises. She was going to throw up, I was sure of it, and so was everyone else. She always did have a weak stomach, and the heat was working at bringing up the little bit of lunch she'd managed to force down less than an hour before.

Miss Hornfellow fixed her eyes sternly on Mary Sue. "You will control yourself, Miss Davis," she said, "or I shall be forced to administer a paddling."

Mary Sue closed her eyes and took deep, gulping breaths. "I am sorry, ma'am," she whispered. To this day I don't know how she managed it, but she kept her lunch down.

"Concentration, ladies and gentlemen," Miss Hornfellow shouted, "concentration is the key to every success in life." She paused for a long moment and glared at Jimmy, who was working frantically at his sums with a combination of sweat and tears streaming down his face. "Mr. Bufort," she said with satisfaction, "is learning the meaning of concentration, and so shall you all.

"You will each take out your pencils and pads," she instructed, "and prepare to write a two page essay on the subject of heat, and how concentration will assist you in dealing with it. I trust you will have no difficulty with this subject matter. You will complete this assignment within thirty minutes. Mr. Bufort will have the correct answer for us also within that time, or I shall begin administering paddlings to each of you, to help Mr. Bufort understand the seriousness of his responsibilities to himself and to all of you. Ready, begin!"

What exactly happened during those thirty minutes is impossible to explain. We worked on our compositions and our concentration. Jimmy labored over his figures, and Miss Hornfellow sat at her desk watching over us with a sharp eye. Precisely one half hour after she'd instructed us to set to work, Miss Abigail Hornfellow announced that class was dismissed.

We stood, in unison, and filed in an orderly fashion past her desk, laying our assignments in a neat pile before her.

Some later claimed to have noticed a strange odor as they approached her desk, others swore they noticed tiny wisps of smoke curling slowly up from her chair. Me, I don't claim to have noticed

a thing, though I will admit I knew well what was about to take place.

We left Room 27, and went to stand in the shade of that big old bent tree that grew outside our classroom. Nothing in my life ever felt so good as leaving that room.

We stood out there, all seventeen of us, staring silently into the classroom, witnessing the results of our work. We saw Mr. Bingsby, the principal, storm into the room, intending, I suppose, to reprimand Miss Hornfellow for releasing us without permission. We saw the astonished look on his face when all he found in our teacher's chair was a pile of smoldering clothing lying in a heap, and a pair of heavy dark stockings smoldering on the floor.

School was dismissed early that day in June, without explanation. We didn't need any explaining, we knew well what had happened in Room 27 and why, though we never shared that knowledge with anyone else.

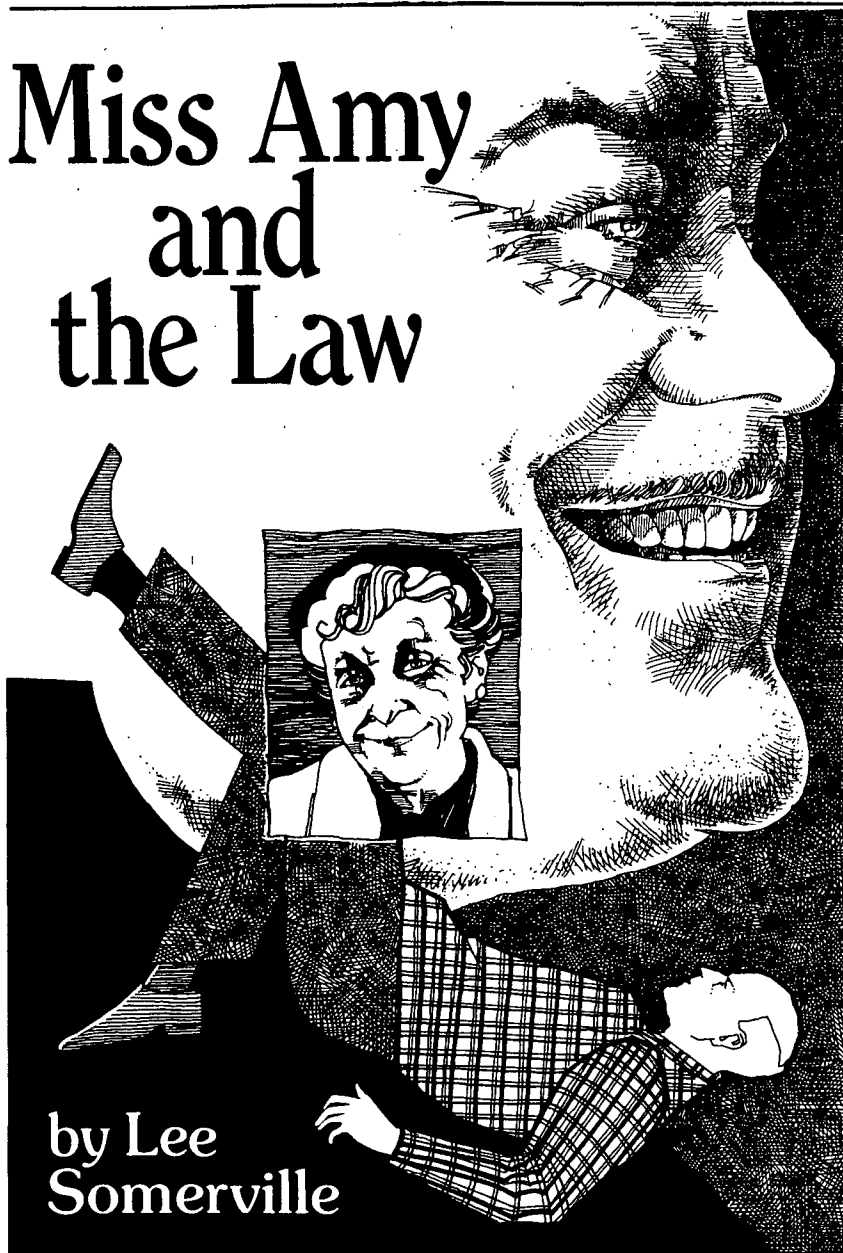
The sheriff spoke with each of us, and got the same story from every one of Miss Hornfellow's students. Officially, they came up with the notion that Miss Hornfellow had expired of the heat, which in a roundabout way, is the truth.

Folks for the most part just shook their heads and muttered about needing better ventilation in the school. Well, that wouldn't hurt, no sir, it wouldn't hurt one bit.

We'll all be starting school again tomorrow, and we hear we're gonna have a real nice teacher this year. That'll be good, real good, we wouldn't want to have to repeat that exercise in concentration that we had to do in Miss Hornfellow's class. Folks just might begin to wonder.

FICTION

# Miss Amy and the Law



by Lee  
Somerville

**T**he first time the professor saw Miss Amy Betts was in June. That was June sixth, three days before he killed her brother Jim. On that morning, with Jim and Amy both still alive, "Professor" J. C. R. Scoggins and I drank coffee and ate Danish rolls in the Branding Iron in Caton, Texas. Our current caper was a land promotion deal.

"We will get the options, Mr. Gaines." Professor Scoggins leaned across the table, stared at me with cold, ash-gray eyes. "The corporation expects us to deliver. We will, won't we?"

I shook my head. "The Betts family won't sign."

"Betts?"

"Jim Betts and Amy Betts. Old bachelor brother and—" I hesitated, since Amy was only two weeks younger than I was. I remembered sandpile days, sixty years ago. I remembered the barn loft and hot times on the verandah in the 1930's. Then I made myself say it, "—old maid sister. The Betts family holds the key to the land our corporation wants. The family has land on both sides of that road."

"Since you are a native of Caton County, the Betts family is your assignment, Mr. Gaines."

"I visited them last night. Jim won't sign."

"His sister?"

I shook my head. "Amy has been reading *Gone With the Wind* again. Every time she reads that book, she assumes the character of Scarlett O'Hara, determined to hold onto family land despite poverty and difficulties."

Scoggins smiled and beckoned the waitress. "More of these wonderful Danish rolls, my dear," he said in cultured, pear-shaped tones. Stroking his dyed mustache, he gave the waitress the benefit of his beaming, synthetic smile.

She wiggled her fat rump in a middle-aged revival of the sex urge. Professor J. C. R. Scoggins, his title as phony as his smile, had that effect on women. That's why the corporation had teamed us together. I knew the country, but over the years I had lost a lot of drive. I'd been inside too many jails, had experienced too many failures. Once, years ago, I might have been as good a con man as the professor. All the corporation expected now was that I would guide him to the natives and let him close the deals.

"If Miss Betts plays the roles of fictional heroines, we have no problem, Mr. Gaines," the professor decreed. "Apparently you do not understand the traumas and desires of once-wealthy gentry. Gentlefolk have Achilles' heels. Now, in the in-



terests of psychology, tell me about Jim and Amy Betts."

Jim's old high-cab farm truck pulled to the curb outside as if on cue. Scoggins' dyed eyebrows rose and his lantern chin dropped. "Who is that?"

"Jim and Amy Betts." I took the rolls from the waitress, pointed with my thumb. "Jim brings eggs and produce to the Branding Iron on weekdays."

Scoggins looked past Jim's lean, bony frame. I drew a controlled breath, tried to keep from showing my memories. Amy looked like a plump little Kewpie doll. Barely more than five feet tall, she was dressed in a pink and white flowered dress and a years-ago white hat trimmed with artificial flowers.

"Very eccentric," Scoggins whispered.

Maybe so, but to me she looked as fragile and delicate as a fine piece of Dresden china. Cute little white curls, done in the style I had liked back in the 1930's, poked from under that ridiculous hat. Even at age sixty-seven, her cheeks still had that peaches-and-cream complexion. She nodded at everybody in sight on the street, smiling myopically from behind gold-rimmed spectacles.

Maybe it was that short-sighted stare from behind those old glasses. Maybe it was her perpetual play-acting, her per-

petual dream world. But the expression on her face was gentle and helpless, just as it had been years ago. Anybody looking at her would know she was wonderfully innocent and untouched by the 1980's. It was a look so sweet, so naive, that it would be hard to describe.

I rubbed my forehead, unconsciously fingering the scar she had put there when we were eight years old.

"Eccentric," Scoggins repeated. "Ah, this will be easy. All we have to do is play on her feeling of history and family pride. Like taking candy from an infant."

She stopped daintily in front of the Branding Iron door, waiting. Tod Tull, the owner, almost broke his neck running to open that door for her. She waited until Jim got a box of eggs and started inside. She nodded graciously at Tod, stepped inside his restaurant like a queen entering a ballroom.

The fat waitress said something, and Amy nodded. She smiled at me, then veered to a table on the other side of the room when she saw Scoggins. The waitress brought iced tea and cakes.

Clearly, from all this service and respect, Amy was still Queen Bee in Caton County, Texas.

Scoggins drummed long fin-

gers on the tabletop. "Does Jim Betts always bring produce to the front door?"

"No Betts ever went to anybody's back door, professor."

He forgot his cultured pose. Grinning like a desert lobo, he showed a long gold tooth under that dyed-brown mustache. "Ah, Mr. Gaines, we have an advantage. Psychologically speaking, no man can afford more pride than money. This will be easy."

Three days later, he stopped smiling. We had had success up to a point. We had convinced some of the landowners along that dirt road that their worn-out Caton County land was of little value. Give us options to buy at this figure, we had said, and we'll try to interest a development firm we know into buying the entire block of land. We'll have to get options on the entire block, of course. Scoggins had smiled and talked fast, and like I said, he had a few signatures.

Most of those who hadn't signed had said they would do so when Jim and Amy Betts gave options on their land. And since their land was essential to the block we had to secure, our success or failure depended on Betts signatures.

We phoned, made an afternoon appointment. Jim was stiffly formal, more regal in overalls and brogans than most

men would have been in tuxedos. Amy was sweet Southern hospitality right out of Margaret Mitchell. No servants now, except a hired man for Jim, so she served iced tea herself on the east verandah.

Scoggins turned on the charm. Looking at the antiques cluttering the place, he asked about a Captain Betts who had come from Virginia to Texas to form his dynasty here.

Amy gasped in pleased surprise. Jim nodded and said that Betts had started with the grant of a league and a labor of land, a considerable amount. He'd added more, of course, but the Civil War had temporarily halted Betts operations. Amy broke in, excited, talking about her grandfather's war record.

"Ah, yes." Scoggins stroked his mustache and went further into his act. If we could secure options on the desired land, he said, this firm in Dallas would create a development here. One of the requisites of any such project would be the naming of streets. A street would be named for their grandfather, of course, and another for their father. Other streets would honor deceased members of the Betts family.

Jim's eyes narrowed as they used to do when I sat too close to Amy. Apparently Jim knew a con man when he heard one.

Amy didn't. "I just love to talk about history!" she said in her little girl voice. She sat on the rattan couch, fanning herself with a palmetto fan, cool and composed in the ninety degree afternoon heat. "Professor, when you return to university teaching, you must research all the history of our county. Did Bob tell you that steamboats used to ply up and down the Red River near here, taking Betts cotton to New Orleans?"

Bob—that's me—hadn't mentioned it. Scoggins placed the tips of his long fingers together and nodded. His eyelids blinked slightly, but he smiled and nodded again. "Most interesting, Miss Betts. Most interesting."

Jim reached for a pencil and pad on a nearby table. "I need information, professor. First, the name and address of this organization you represent. Second, I need your full name and the name of the universities where you used to teach. And third, I have a question: You are a licensed realtor, are you not?"

Scoggins blinked again. Still smiling, he gave the name and address of our organization in Dallas. Then he rose, said he would bring papers tomorrow to show his academic record.

We both knew Jim had put us on thin ice. We kept up ap-

pearances as we walked to the professor's small car. We waved courtly goodbyes to Jim and Amy, and said we would return at ten in the morning.

Scoggins headed his car west, driving too fast for the narrow dirt road.

"Blind turn ahead," I reminded him. "Slow down before we hit Betts Corner."

He accelerated to show me he was boss. We went into the Woods Road, temporarily blinded by the change from glaring sunlight to gray shade. Huge oaks, protected by Betts patriarchs for almost one hundred and fifty years, barricaded Betts land with their heavy trunks, forming a green-brown roof overhead with interlocked branches. It was like being in a tunnel. The road twisted a sharp ninety degrees from west to south and sixty degrees southwesterly from there. Blackberry vines, heavy with yellow dust from the powdery road, reached for us.

Scoggins grazed a scarred trunk as the car went into the shallow ditch on that blind turn. He swerved hard left, slowing the car to regain control.

When we left that clump of woods, he parked on the narrow shoulder of the open road, facing the hot sun.

"This is a very backward country, Mr. Gaines."

"Is Jim Betts the first man to doubt your academic record, professor?"

He retaliated by cutting off the motor. With it, of course, went the car's air conditioner. Hot Texas wind seared my cheeks as I rolled down the car window. Sweat poured from every bit of my body.

"Somewhere in Jim Betts' makeup there are weaknesses," Scoggins said in a flat, cold voice. "Weakness we must exploit. Remember: the individual can be understood only through a complete synthesis of all data about him."

"Cut out the doubletalk. We're alone now, remember?"

"You are ignorant of psychology, Mr. Gaines. We will explore human foibles, hoping for a solution. Talk, damn you! Tell me about Jim Betts!"

I wanted to tell him to go to hell. I couldn't, though. All these years I had worked alone, doing con jobs here, promotions there, and I had practically nothing to show for it. Nothing except memories of roachy hotels and occasional small town jails. Luckily, I had never been convicted of embezzlement, but that was due to lack of my own nerve and because I always tried to operate within a semblance of legality. The professor worked the same way, of course, but he worked a lot smoother. He was

still in his early fifties, younger than I was, more vital and with a better con man record. And because of him, I had a chance to work with this land promotion group, this organization in Dallas. If we could get the options we needed, we'd split ten thousand dollars.

"I'm waiting, Mr. Gaines."

Taking a damp cigar from my sweaty pocket, I lighted it and added to the heat. "Old Man Betts lost a fortune in cotton futures in the crash of 1929," I began. "He stayed stiff-necked and proud the rest of his life. Even in August, with Texas temperatures well over a hundred degrees, I never saw him without a suit and a tie. He walked Caton County like a king, living off his credit. Jim put on overalls and kept the family going. He worked hard. He made money off soy beans after cotton prices fell. Old Man Betts died, and Jim became the boss of Betts property. Then Old Mrs. Betts came down with cancer. All this time, Miss Amy—"

"Stay with Jim Betts."

"Old Mrs. Betts lived three years, mostly in hospitals. They had to sell much of the land. Jim insisted that they sell only to people who would treat the land right. Caton County has been on the downhill drag since the 1920's, so land didn't bring

much. Jim is in his mid-seventies now. Most of the young people have gone from Caton County—left to find jobs in towns. No really cheap labor is left here, so Jim makes do with one regular hired hand, and he's old. Jim owns some cattle, but his farming is restricted to raising a little produce for local markets and selling eggs."

"Not much money in that."

"Not when you're old. You saw his truck. Old thing is at least twenty years of age, and far too heavy for his current needs."

Scoggins reached into my shirt pocket, helped himself to one of my cigars. "What about vices? Does he drink? Chase wanton women? Gamble?"

I had to laugh. "Not that buzzard. He was straitlaced and sober even when he was young. His only vice is that he protects Amy—he has always spoiled her and protected her, and he still thinks she's a cute little baby sister. He never really let her grow up."

Scoggins blew cigar smoke, thinking. "Interesting weakness, Mr. Gaines. Hardly time to explore that avenue, however."

Even while baking in that hot car under the Texas sun, I thought of cool nights on the verandah with Amy wriggling closer and closer to me when we

had been in our teens and early twenties. She had been hot to death in those days, a spoiled kid who was ready to elope any time I gave the word. I thought of how Jim had supported both his parents when they refused to give us permission to marry. Of how Jim always sat near the window next to the verandah, acting as chaperone. After he caught us wrapped too closely around each other one night, he cornered me in a clump of woods. He had split my lip and bloodied my nose and ordered me to leave Caton County.

I left the county the next day. Even then I had a phobia against the sight of blood. Especially my blood.

"Talk, Mr. Gaines. Does Jim have a hobby?"

"He likes to fish. Years ago, when he was upset about something, he'd stop work and go fishing in that stock pond across from the corner with all the trees. He'd fish for an hour or two, then go back to work. I understand he fishes every day this time of year. He's a punctual son of a gun. Always goes by the clock."

"You mean he has a psychological adherence to time?" Scoggins stared at me with those ash-cold eyes.

"One of the neighbors said you can set your watch by the time he crosses the road every

afternoon. At five, he stops work for a while. At five ten he crosses the road, pole in hand. Promptly at six, even if the fish have just begun to bite—"

Scoggins started the motor. "Let's go drink beer, Mr. Gaines."

**H**ot as I was, I downed two beers before I noticed he drank Coca-cola. Scoggins' big weakness was liquor, so I knew he was thinking. Hell, his brain cells went click-click all the time. Cold brain cells, aloof, impersonal, hiding behind that phony mask of culture and good will.

At a few minutes of six, he nodded and seemed pleased with himself. "Time to return to Caton, Mr. Gaines."

"One more beer for me."

"No. We have business at hand."

With the afternoon sun low behind us, we drove at normal speed on the dusty road. A jack-rabbit jumped from bois d'arc trees ahead of us, ran along the road for a while before darting into sumac.

We approached Betts Corner cautiously.

"Place was okay a hundred years ago," I began as we headed into the shade of those giant oaks. "Now with automobiles—watch out—ahead of us!"

True to habit, Jim Betts had started toward home and supper. He turned in the dim shade, a string of perch in one hand, his cane pole in the other. His head jerked, startled, then he moved fast. Stretching his long legs, he jumped for the south side of the road.

Scoggins tromped the accelerator, aimed the car directly at the old man. The motor roared and the wheels kicked dust. The car caught Jim at the south edge of the road as he jumped a second time. There was a *whop!* of metal against lean flesh and bone. The fishing pole rose high in the air. Fish smashed against the windshield.

Jim bent over the hood, fingers spread wide on both hands, reaching. His false teeth popped against the windshield, shattering as his tongue stuck out and his mouth gaped wider and wider.

We pulled out of the south ditch and lurched to a stop. Jim's body straightened from the hood, revolving slowly. Then he crashed down, scattering yellow dust as he bounced in the blackberry vines.

I got out of the car and vomited all over my side of the road.

Scoggins made sure he was dead. Then he came back to me. His long fingers gripped my arm, cutting off the circulation.

"Unavoidable accident, Mr. Gaines."

"You killed him."

"You have no will power, Mr. Gaines."

I made myself glance at Jim, saw his blood pool in the grass at the bottom of the blackberry vines. I vomited again.

"You are part of this." Scoggins grabbed my hair and pulled my face upright so that I had to look into his eyes. "You have just guzzled five beers, and I am cold sober. What will the court do if I say you were driving?"

That explained the Coca-cola. Sure, somebody back at the beer joint might swear Scoggins was driving when we left that place. But maybe nobody had noticed. There had been no witnesses when we hit Jim.

Clearly, Professor Scoggins had planned this to the minute.

A car approached, loaded with natives.

"An accident, Mr. Gaines," Scoggins emphasized. He released his hold on my hair. "Unavoidable. Continue to be sick, while I do the talking."

I staggered through the small gate onto Betts property. As soon as I cleared that clump of trees, I saw Amy in the yard. Probably it was the first time in years Jim had been late for supper.

I must have looked like a ghost as I ran toward her. Her

peaches-and-cream complexion drained to a pasty white. She stood quietly, her body rigid, waiting while I gulped great breaths of air.

"It's Jim, isn't it, Bob?"

My hair flopped as I nodded.

"Take me to him."

"Amy, you can't—" But she did. She helped load him in the ambulance. Even though he was dead, she bent over him, petted him, on that useless ride to the hospital. She was not play-acting now. She was still small and chubby, but she was very much a Betts, very much in control of herself.

At the inquest, Judge Miller blamed the county road commissioner for letting trees grow unchecked around that blind corner. The commissioner wasn't called to testify. His defense would have been that the Betts family hadn't wanted the trees cut, years ago. Everybody local always went cautiously, usually honking a horn and often turning on lights before making that turn.

Judge Miller lambasted Scoggins for careless driving. He admitted there was legally no violation on speed. Sheriff Hulen nodded and whispered something to a deputy. The deputy's hard cheeks creased with a pleased grin. I wondered if the sheriff had read the signs left in the dust, if he had figured



out that Scoggins actually gunned his car as he chased Jim.

"I tried to keep from hitting the poor man," J. C. R. Scoggins lied. Taking his white handkerchief from a hip pocket, he blew his nose and wiped his eyes. "He was in front of me before I knew it. *Homo sapiens* is an inferior specimen, your Honor. Human vision does not adjust rapidly. Going from bright sunlight to shade, I must have blinked, and there Mr. Betts was, right in the middle of the road. I swerved to miss him. Just as I swerved, he jumped in front of my car. I—"

Here Scoggins pretended to break down completely. It took a couple of minutes and a lot of loud nose-blowing before he pretended to regain control. Finally he went on. "Ah, tragedy! Tragedy most foul! I must have missed the brakes and hit that gas pedal. I must have! I was trying so hard to stop, and the car seemed to roar and jump instead of stopping. I must have hit the gas by mistake. I almost turned over, trying to stop. It happened so fast, and I was so excited—"

Sheriff Hulen's mouth twisted in a sarcastic grimace. The deputy said something under his breath. Scoggins mopped his eyes again, peered at them over his handkerchief. His admis-

sion had just blown any evidence the sheriff had against him.

Judge Miller decreed that Jim's death was an unavoidable accident.

Back in our hotel room, Scoggins celebrated with scotch and soda.

I drank carefully. Every time I looked at his long face, I could feel icy prickles up and down my spine. I wondered if he would kill me. After all, I had been the only witness to Jim's death. I'd be safe for a while, of course. He wouldn't dare put two "accidental" deaths back to back.

Scoggins stared at me, his ash-gray eyes unblinking. "There is a right way to do things, and a wrong way. Stay within the appearance of the law, and you always come out clean. Right, Mr. Gaines?"

I tried to ignore him.

"Trouble with you, Mr. Gaines, is that you do things halfway. No nerve. You've chased the Almighty Dollar for years, but what do you have?"

"I've never killed."

"You are a sentimentalist, Mr. Gaines. A soft-hearted, sentimental slob. But if we get all the options, the organization will pay us ten thousand dollars. Right? So tomorrow, Mr. Gaines, you will call on Miss Betts."

"She is in no mood for business."

"You will console her. You will talk softly of youthful days. Judging from her clothes and hairdo, I assume Miss Betts has a psychological hangup about youthful days."

"If I go, I refuse to talk business."

"Of course, Mr. Gaines. However, as soon as the estate is settled and Miss Betts declared to be the only living heir, you will get her signature on that option."

She wasn't home the next day. On the day after that I found her in the far pasture, driving Jim's old truck around and around. I didn't believe it at first, but the hired man told me she was serious.

I lured Quiz Kid Scoggins into the Branding Iron at nine o'clock the next morning. Jim's old truck jolted past and stopped at the courthouse. The hired man got out from under the steering wheel and opened the door on the passenger side.

What looked like a space kid stepped out. Or a kid playing spaceman. It was Amy, a big crash helmet covering her head, boots protecting her small feet and legs, an incongruous chest protector—an old baseball umpire's chest protector borrowed from somewhere—shielding her short, plump, female figure.

Scoggins choked on his orange juice. His face purple, he pointed a rigid digit.

I got up and joined Tod Tull at the window. "That's Amy?" I acted as if I didn't know for sure.

"Miss Amy," Tod corrected me. His voice was cold and distant. People in Caton County are clannish. I wasn't a stranger, but I had brought the professor into this town. He had killed Jim, and nobody wanted to associate with us. Their attitude would wear off, but it would take a few days. "Miss Amy Betts, left all alone now, wants to carry on. With only a hired man to help around that farm, she insists she will get her driver's license for that truck."

"She can't deliver eggs and produce."

"Can't, but don't never underestimate a Betts. Back in 1821, when Captain Betts came from Virginia, a group of wild Indians—"

"That was years ago. Amy is several generations removed and she is spoiled by too many soft years."

"A Betts is a Betts. I told Miss Amy she could buy a new pickup truck, a few tons lighter than that antique, but she wouldn't listen. She said it was Jim's truck, and she wouldn't part with it. You know how Miss Amy is about old things."

I knew. All those antiques in the Betts home would bring a fortune if she would sell.

The fat waitress said the shock of Jim's death had driven Miss Amy over the ragged edge. She had always dressed funny, but she had always been real feminine. And now look. Why, Miss Amy must have lost her mind.

Tod told her to get back to work. Judge Miller came in and joined our group at the window. The fat waitress appealed to him. "Don't you think Miss Amy's marbles have scattered?"

Judge Miller reserved comment. Down the street, the driver's license examiner helped Amy into the truck. It started with a series of small explosions.

"Miss Amy is scared to death," the waitress persisted.

"Scared, but game," Tod defended her. "She's scared, of course. That's why the crash helmet. She had Cunningham add seat belts, shoulder belts, and extensions to the pedals so she can reach them with her little short legs. She had him strengthen the front bumper and grill of that truck, making it mighty like a tank. Even if she runs into a tree, she's safe as a bird in a nest."

"You can stop her from driving," I appealed to Judge Miller. "First thing that happens, she'll go up a wall."

Scoggins came up behind me and placed a cold hand on my shoulder. "Let it be, Gaines. Miss Betts has a phobia concerning normal automotive traffic, but let it be. I feel sorry for the poor woman."

Tod and the waitress backed away, as if Scoggins had leprosy. Judge Miller stood firm. "I go by the law. By the law, understand. Until we have definite proof that her mind is affected, she drives if she passes her test."

She passed the test. Then she left town, still driving, headed toward home.

Scoggins could hardly wait until he whipped his little car onto the road. When we topped Dimple Hill, the truck was ahead of us. He deliberately gunned the motor and cut loose with his horn. Amy went into the ditch. He cut sharp in front of her, laughing.

"You bastard!" I exclaimed.

"Just testing her nerves, Mr. Gaines."

"Word of this gets around the county, nobody will do business with us."

"First things first, Mr. Gaines. Psychologically Miss Betts is where I want her. She's about to break. She hates me, but she likes you. I'll keep her upset, while you pretend to be her friend."

"Not me."

"Ethics, Mr. Gaines? Do you remember a land deal in Ruidoso, New Mexico? And what about the name you used when you sold silver stock in Arizona for a mine that didn't exist?"

"You—"

"Exactly, Mr. Gaines. The corporation—or certain people who helped form the corporation—have known about you for years. You will cooperate, Mr. Gaines."

"You can go to hell!"

"No. But we will return to Caton, and you will get in your car and visit Miss Betts. You will offer tender loving care and you will do everything possible for her. She doesn't need to haul eggs in that truck because you will offer to haul them in your car. Psychologically, Miss Betts is very depressed and irrational. This is the perfect time for you to offer comfort. And romance, if there is any romance left at your age."

He turned around at the first intersection. The hired man, driving the truck now, shook his fist as we met.

When I called on Amy, I apologized for what Scoggins had done. Her face was puffy from crying about Jim, but she was composed. She was in no hurry to gather eggs or do any of the myriad things she had told the neighbors she would do. We sat on the west verandah, away

from the morning sun. She objected slightly when I put my arm around her, but she didn't move away.

I looked at the book lying on the floor. A drawing of Joan of Arc on its open pages made me chuckle.

"Bob?"

"Laughing at you. This morning, dressed in boots and crash helmet and all that gunk, you were Joan of Arc riding into battle."

Picking up a flower vase, she swung at me. I ducked. "I like you better when you play Ramona or some other little girl in love."

"Oh, Bob, this is no time for such." Then she giggled.

At noon, she conned me into washing the leftover breakfast dishes. Even at sixty-seven, she was still spoiled, still the little girl used to having her own way.

"How long will you work for this fake Professor Scoggins, Bob?" she asked seriously after a while.

"I don't know." The idea that he knew all about me, that he would probably kill me someday if I stayed with the corporation, had been constantly in the back of my mind. He'd try to blackmail me into staying, but I couldn't do that.

"Did he send you here to make love to me?"

I hesitated. I couldn't lie to her. "He's at String Town now, probably getting drunk," I evaded. "Look, Amy, that man is ruthless. There's no limit to what he might do. Why not sign that option before he resorts to pressure?"

"Like he did with Jim?"

"The judge called that an accident."

"What did you call it, Bob?"

She stood near me, looking up, her eyes still soft behind those old fashioned spectacles, her appearance deceptively gentle. I rubbed the scar on my forehead and remembered she could be rough at times.

"Now he wants you to romance me into signing that option." She seemed to be deliberately picking a quarrel. "Good day, Bob. It was a nice try, wasn't it?"

Her voice changed from soft music to almost shrill. "Maybe I'll sign and maybe I won't. But if I do, you won't be in on it. Much as I hate him, I'll do business with him instead of you."

Her last words were, "Don't come back here. I mean it."

The townspeople should have seen her then. Gentle, shy Miss Amy screaming like a fishwife.

All the way to String Town, I envisioned myself hitting Scoggins on his long, high-arched patrician nose. I knew I wouldn't, though. If I tried

it, he might hit back.

He was half drunk when I entered the beer joint. He might as well drink for a few days. Nobody in Caton County would do business with him until they forgot about Jim Betts.

He made matters worse when he saw me. He leaned across his table, leered at a blonde woman who had seen too many beers, then focused on me. "Hey, Gaines, you do any good with that old biddy?"

I ordered a beer and sat on the other side of the room.

"Gaines does not unnerstan' psychology," he told the blonde in his grand manner. "He's a failure all his life. All his life. Does not unnerstan' psychology of women."

Giggling, she said something. They both laughed.

The phone rang just as I started to leave. Somebody called Scoggins. Drawing himself slowly erect, he lurched up and stood weaving while he talked into the phone. Wobbly but erect, he beckoned for me to meet him outside.

"Your old sweetheart, Gaines. You mis'h boat, but ol' professor scores again."

"The hell you say!"

"She wantsh to sign papersh. Said absolutely not bring you. Said she leaves onna bus to visit cousin in Dallas. Abs'lutely not let you come with me, but

she leaves in few minutes. I gotta hurry."

He staggered to his car, fumbled for his keys. When I yelled at him to wait for me, he gunned the motor and sprayed me with gravel as the car skidded onto the dirt road.

I followed in my own car. When he slowed down, I honked and blinked my lights and waved for him to stop. He outran me, of course.

I slowed to a speed compatible with the road. All around me this dusty green country had a curiously quiet and peaceful appearance. Aside from the distant roar of Scoggins' car, there were only sounds of peace and love. Mourning doves called from nearby pastures. Calves bleated to other calves. A cow made a soft moo, reminding her frisky offspring it was time for supper.

Far ahead—the impact muffled by the trees and underbrush of Betts Corner—I heard a *whump!* of metal on metal. Then, just as I cautiously touched the gas, I heard a long-drawn masculine scream.

It was as I knew it would be. Jim's old truck blocked the road at the blind spot on the corner. Pieces of Scoggins' car had scattered against oak trees and blackberry vines. Most of the small car was still against the heavy bumpers and reinforced grill of the truck.

He screamed again as I ran past him. Amy's chubby little body was cocooned inside the truck cab, trussed in a seat belt and a shoulder belt and further protected by the crash helmet and that ridiculous chest protector.

She held her breath while I checked her heartbeat and pulse. Looking inside her crash helmet at her tightly closed eyes, I noted she had removed her gold-rimmed spectacles before the crash.

I found them in her purse. "Put these on right now," I ordered. "People know you can't see to drive without these glasses."

Her blue eyes opened wide and blinked as I adjusted the glasses.

"Bob?"

"Save your innocent look for the inquest. You'll be okay. Thanks for mentioning that cousin you do not have in Dallas. I might have been in the cab with him if you hadn't mentioned that fake cousin."

"You wouldn't have," she insisted. Unbuckling her two belts, she peered over the high dash of the old truck. Scoggins screamed twice more, then slumped forward.

She blinked. "I don't dare get out for a better look?"

"Dammit, no! Stay in the cab. When help comes, act confused and addled. Act like you fainted

and don't know what happened."

"I want to know."

I made myself look. "He's caught in some twisted metal," I reported. "Blood—ugh!—blood is spurting all over his thigh. I might save him, but I'd get sick. I can't stand the sight of blood."

Small ladylike lips curved in a pleased smile. Twin dimples deepened.

"Neither can I," she lied in her little girl voice.

Waiting for Scoggins to die, I thought of how little he understood his favorite topic, psychology. At age eight, Amy had clobbered me with her toy

shovel. Bright blood had gushed from my forehead, from that place where I carry a scar even today. I had danced and yelled in sheer panic. She had stood before me with that prim, satisfied smile, her blue eyes fascinated just as they were now.

When you move in on any spoiled, helpless-appearing female, whether she is eight or sixty-seven, beware. I wanted to give this bit of wisdom to that son-of-a-bitch "Professor" Scoggins, to tease him with it before he died. But before I got nerve enough to do it, he was dead. Legally dead as a result of what the Caton County authorities happily called an "accident."



MYSTERY CLASSIC

# Calloway's Code

by O. Henry



Illustration by Hank Blaustein

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**T**he New York *Enterprise* sent H. B. Calloway as special correspondent to the Russo-Japanese-Portsmouth war.

For two months Calloway hung about Yokohama and Tokyo, shaking dice with the other correspondents for drinks of 'rickshaws—oh, no, that's something to ride in; anyhow, he wasn't earning the salary that his paper was paying him. But that was not Calloway's fault. The little brown men who held the strings of Fate between their fingers were not ready for the readers of the *Enterprise* to season their breakfast bacon and eggs with the battles of the descendants of the gods.

But soon the column of correspondents that were to go out with the First Army tightened their field-glass belts and went down to the Yalu with Kuroki. Calloway was one of these.

Now, this is no history of the battle of Yalu River. That has been told in detail by the correspondents who gazed at the shrapnel smoke rings from a distance of three miles. But, for justice's sake, let it be understood that the Japanese commander prohibited a nearer view.

Calloway's feat was accomplished before the battle. What he did was to furnish the *Enterprise* with the biggest beat of the war. That paper published exclusively and in detail the news of the attack on the lines of the Russian General Zassulitch on the same day that it was made. No other paper printed a word about it for two days afterward, except a London paper, whose account was absolutely incorrect and untrue.

Calloway did this in face of the fact that General Kuroki was making his moves and laying his plans with the profoundest secrecy as far as the world outside his camps was concerned. The correspondents were forbidden to send out any news whatever of his plans; and every message that was allowed on the wires was censored with rigid severity.

The correspondent for the London paper handed in a cablegram describing Kuroki's plans; but as it was wrong from beginning to end the censor grinned and let it go through.

So, there they were—Kuroki on one side of the Yalu with forty-two thousand infantry, five thousand cavalry, and one hundred and twenty-four guns. On the other side Zassulitch waited for him with only twenty-three thousand men, and with a long stretch of river to guard. And Calloway had got hold of some important inside information that he knew would bring the *Enterprise* staff around a cablegram as thick as flies around a Park Row lemonade stand. If he could only get that message past the censor—the new censor

who had arrived and taken his post that day!

Calloway did the obviously proper thing. He lit his pipe and sat down on a gun carriage to think it over. And there we must leave him; for the rest of the story belongs to Vesey, a sixteen-dollar-a-week reporter on the *Enterprise*.

Calloway's cablegram was handed to the managing editor at four o'clock in the afternoon. He read it three times; and then drew a pocket mirror from a pigeon hole in his desk, and looked at his reflection carefully. Then he went over to the desk of Boyd, his assistant (he usually called Boyd when he wanted him), and laid the cablegram before him.

"It's from Calloway," he said. "See what you make of it."

The message was dated at Wi-ju, and these were the words of it:

*Foregone preconcerted rash witching goes muffled rumor  
mine dark silent unfortunate richmond existing great hotly  
brute select mooted parlous beggars ye angel incontrover-  
tible.*

Boyd read it twice.

"It's either a cipher or a sunstroke," said he.

"Ever hear of anything like a code in the office—a secret code?" asked the m. e., who had held his desk for only two years. Managing editors come and go.

"None except the vernacular that the lady specials write in," said Boyd. "Couldn't be an acrostic, could it?"

"I thought of that," said the m. e., "but the beginning letters contain only four vowels. It must be a code of some sort."

"Try 'em in groups," suggested Boyd. "Let's see—'Rash witching goes' not with me it doesn't. 'Muffled rumor mine'—must have an underground wire. 'Dark silent unfortunate richmond'—no reason why he should knock that town so hard. 'Existing great hotly'—no, it doesn't pan out. I'll call Scott."

The city editor came in a hurry, and tried his luck. A city editor must know something about everything; so Scott knew a little about cipher writing.

"It may be what is called an inverted alphabet cipher," said he. "I'll try that. 'R' seems to be the oftenest used initial letter, with the exception of 'm.' Assuming 'r' to mean 'e,' the most frequently used vowel, we transpose the letters—so."

Scott worked rapidly with his pencil for two minutes; and then

showed the first word according to his reading—the word “Scejtzez.”

“Great!” cried Boyd. “It’s a charade. My first is a Russian general. Go on, Scott.”

“No, that won’t work,” said the city editor. “It’s undoubtedly a code. It’s impossible to read it without the key. Has the office ever used a cipher code?”

“Just what I was asking,” said the m. e. “Hustle everybody up that ought to know. We must get at it some way. Calloway has evidently got hold of something big, and the censor has put the screws on, or he wouldn’t have cabled in a lot of chop suey like this.”

Throughout the office of the *Enterprise* a dragnet was sent, hauling in such members of the staff as would be likely to know of a code, past or present, by reason of their wisdom, information, natural intelligence, or length of servitude. They got together in a group in the city room, with the m. e. in the center. No one had heard of a code. All began to explain to the head investigator that newspapers never use a code, anyhow—that is, a cipher code. Of course the Associated Press stuff is a sort of code—an abbreviation, rather—but—

The m. e. knew all that, and said so. He asked each man how long he had worked on the paper. Not one of them had drawn pay from an *Enterprise* envelope for longer than six years. Calloway had been on the paper twelve years.

“Try old Heffelbauer,” said the m. e. “He was here when Park Row was a potato patch.”

Heffelbauer was an institution. He was half janitor, half handyman about the office, and half watchman—thus becoming the peer of thirteen and one-half tailors. Sent for, he came, radiating his nationality.

“Heffelbauer,” said the m. e., “did you ever hear of a code belonging to the office a long time ago—a private code? You know what a code is, don’t you?”

“Yah,” said Heffelbauer. “Sure I know vat a code is. Yah, apout dwelf or fifteen year ago der office had a code. Der reborters in der city room haf it here.”

“Ah!” said the m. e. “We’re getting on the trail now. Where was it kept, Heffelbauer? What do you know about it?”

“Somedimes,” said the retainer, “dey keep it in der little room behind der library room.”

“Can you find it?” asked the m. e., eagerly. “Do you know where it is?”

"Mein Gott!" said Heffelbauer. "How long you dink a code live? Der reborters call him a maskeet. But von day he butt mit his head der editor, und—"

"Oh, he's talking about a goat," said Boyd. "Get out, Heffelbauer."

Again discomfited, the concerted wit and resource of the *Enterprise* huddled around Calloway's puzzle, considering its mysterious words in vain.

Then Vesey came in.

Vesey was the youngest reporter. He had a thirty-two-inch chest and wore a number fourteen collar; but his bright Scotch plaid suit gave him presence and conferred no obscurity upon his whereabouts. He wore his hat in such a position that people followed him about to see him take it off, convinced that it must be hung upon a peg driven into the back of his head. He was never without an immense, knotted, hardwood cane with a German-silver tip on its crooked handle. Vesey was the best photograph hustler in the office. Scott said it was because no living human being could resist the personal triumph it was to hand his picture over to Vesey. Vesey always wrote his own news stories, except the big ones, which were sent to the rewrite men. Add to this fact that among the inhabitants, temples, and groves of the earth nothing existed that could abash Vesey, and his dim sketch is concluded.

Vesey butted into the circle of cipher readers very much as Heffelbauer's "code" would have done, and asked what was up. Someone explained, with the touch of half-familiar condescension that they always used toward him. Vesey reached out and took the cablegram from the m. e.'s hand. Under the protection of some special Providence, he was always doing appalling little things like that, and coming off unscathed.

"It's a code," said Vesey. "Anybody got the key?"

"The office has no code," said Boyd, reaching for the message. Vesey held to it.

"Then old Calloway expects us to read it, anyhow," said he. "He's up a tree, or something, and he's made this up so as to get it by the censor. It's up to us. Gee! I wish they had sent me, too. Say—we can't afford to fall down on our end of it. 'Foregone, preconcerted rash, witching'—h'm."

Vesey sat down on a table corner and began to whistle softly, frowning at the cablegram.

"Let's have it, please," said the m. e. "We've got to get to work on it."

"I believe I've got a line on it," said Vesey. "Give me ten minutes."

He walked to his desk, threw his hat into a wastebasket, spread out flat on his chest like a gorgeous lizard, and started his pencil going. The wit and wisdom of the *Enterprise* remained in a loose group, and smiled at one another, nodding their heads toward Vesey. Then they began to exchange their theories about the cipher.

It took Vesey exactly fifteen minutes. He brought to the m. e. a pad with a code key written on it.

"I felt the swing of it as soon as I saw it," said Vesey. "Hurrah for old Calloway! He's done the Japs and every paper in town that prints literature instead of news. Take a look at that."

Thus had Vesey set forth the reading of the code:

*Foregone—conclusion*  
*Preconcerted—arrangement*  
*Rash—act*  
*Witching—hour of midnight*  
*Goes—without saying*  
*Muffled—report*  
*Rumor—hath it*  
*Mine—host*  
*Dark—horse*  
*Silent—majority*  
*Unfortunate—pedestrians<sup>1</sup>*  
*Richmond—in the field*

*Existing—Conditions*  
*Great—White Way*  
*Hotly—contested*  
*Brute—force*  
*Select—few*  
*Mooted—question*  
*Parlous—times*  
*Beggars—description*  
*Ye—correspondent*  
*Angel—unawares*  
*Incontrovertible—fact*

"It's simply newspaper English," explained Vesey. "I've been reporting on the *Enterprise* long enough to know it by heart. Old Calloway gives us the cue word, and we use the word that naturally follows it just as we use 'em in the paper. Read it over, and you'll see how pat they drop into their places. Now, here's the message he intended us to get."

Vesey handed out another sheet of paper.

*Concluded arrangement to act at hour of midnight without saying. Report hath it that a large body of cavalry and an overwhelming force of infantry will be thrown into the field. Conditions white. Way contested by only a small force. Question the Times description. Its correspondent is unaware of the facts.*

"Great stuff!" cried Boyd, excitedly. "Kuroki crosses the Yalu

tonight and attacks. Oh, we won't do a thing to the sheets that make up with Addison's essays, real estate transfers, and bowling scores!"

"Mr. Vesey," said the m. e., with his jollyng-which-you-should-regard-as-a-favor manner, "you have cast a serious reflection upon the literary standards of the paper that employs you. You have assisted materially in giving us the biggest 'beat' of the year. I will let you know in a day or two whether you are to be discharged or retained at a larger salary. Somebody send Ames to me."

Ames was the kingpin, the snowy-petaled marguerite, the star-bright looloo of the rewrite men. He saw attempted murder in the pains of green-apple colic, cyclones in the summer zephyr, lost children in every top-spinning urchin, an uprising of the down-trodden masses in every hurling of a derelict potato at a passing automobile. When not rewriting, Ames sat on the porch of his Brooklyn villa playing checkers with his ten-year-old son.

Ames and the "war editor" shut themselves in a room. There was a map in there stuck full of little pins that represented armies and divisions. Their fingers had been itching for days to move those pins along the crooked line of the Yalu. They did so now; and in words of fire Ames translated Calloway's brief message into a front page masterpiece that set the world talking. He told of the secret councils of the Japanese officers; gave Kuroki's flaming speeches in full; counted the cavalry and infantry to a man and a horse; described the quick and silent building of the bridge at Suikauchen, across which the Midado's legions were hurled upon the surprised Zassulitch, whose troops were widely scattered along the river. And the battle!—well, you know what Ames can do with a battle if you give him just one smell of smoke for a foundation. And in the same story, with seemingly supernatural knowledge, he gleefully scored the most profound and ponderous paper in England for the false and misleading account of the intended movements of the Japanese First Army printed in its issue of *the same date*.

Only one error was made; and that was the fault of the cable operator at Wi-ju. Calloway pointed it out after he came back. The word "great" in his code should have been "gage" and its complementary words "of battle." But it went to Ames "conditions white," and of course he took that to mean snow. His description of the Japanese army struggling through the snowstorm, blinded by whirling flakes, was thrillingly vivid. The artists turned out some effective illustrations that made a hit as pictures of the artillery dragging their guns through the drifts. But, as the attack was



made on the first day of May, the "conditions white" excited some amusement. But it made no difference to the *Enterprise*, anyway.

It was wonderful. And Calloway was wonderful in having made the new censor believe that his jargon of words meant no more than a complaint of the dearth of news and a petition for more expense money. And Vesey was wonderful. And most wonderful of all are words, and how they make friends one with another, being oft associated, until not even obituary notices them do part.

On the second day following, the city editor halted at Vesey's desk where the reporter was writing the story of a man who had broken his leg by falling into a coal-hole—Ames having failed to find a murder motive in it.

"The old man says your salary is to be raised to twenty a week," said Scott.

"All right," said Vesey. "Every little helps. Say—Mr. Scott, which would you say—'We can state without fear of successful contradiction,' or, 'On the whole it can be safely asserted'?"

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<sup>1</sup>Mr. Vesey afterward explained that the logical journalistic complement of the word "unfortunate" was once the word "victim." But, since the automobile became so popular, the correct following word is now "pedestrians." Of course, in Calloway's code it meant infantry.

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## SOLUTION TO THE MID-DECEMBER "UNSOLVED":

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The secret move that the red forces must make before they can capture the monster is to ignore the black piece and move out directly towards position 1. Entering position 1 by way of position 3 and leaving by 2, or entering by 2 and leaving by 3, bestows upon the red side the power to defeat the powers of darkness. Your opening moves, disregarding what moves black may make, should be: 26-24, 24-20, 20-19, 19-15, 15-11, 11-7, 7-3, 3-1, 1-2. After making the last move, it is time for the red forces to go on the attack. Pursue the black piece, pushing him always away from position 1 in the northwest corner. It will only be a matter of time before you capture the enemy. If he gets around you and manages to pass through position 1 you will have to return and go through position 1 to regain your advantage. One last puzzle: see if you can analyze this game and come up with the reason that makes position 1 so important in delivering certain victory to the red side.

# BOOKED & PRINTED

by Mary Cannon



Illustration by Jim Gulsen

**T**here are dozens of new private eyes on the scene each year, but Edward Mathis's Dan Roman series seems to be heads above the crowd. **Natural Prey** is the third in the series, and it's good. Ralph Kincade's family has hired Dan to bring Ralph, a runaway, home to them. But no sooner is the task done than Dan is informed by his pal, the police chief, that Kincade's been murdered in his home. Dan, a former policeman, is drafted to help the local constabulary with the murder investigation, but he's stymied. The family members have ironclad alibis, and Dan can't turn up a motive anywhere. Then there's a second incident—a double murder, this time—which seems unrelated to the Kincade homicide, except for one thing: the weapon appears to be identical. And as Dan cannot help noticing, the family members in the second case seem to have perfect alibis, too. The Texas background and Mathis's fresh writing style breathe life into a plot that—I must confess—I guessed. (Scribner's, \$15.95, 226 pp.)

**The Crossword Hunt** (Ballantine, \$2.95, 199 pp.) is the fifth in a very special series of mysteries. The protagonist is Giles Sullivan, a very bright man who authors crossword puzzles. Together with his lady love—acting president of a prestigious private college in this novel—he is admirably suited to solve puzzling murders. The twist here is that actual crossword puzzles appear throughout the novels, and the reader's ability to complete said puzzles greatly

increases his chances of solving the mystery. Get it? If you're one of the many mystery lovers who also consume crossword puzzles with relish, then this series has your name on it. They're lots of fun.

**The Black Dahlia** was the name the popular press gave to a beautiful young woman whose mutilated body was found in Los Angeles in January, 1947. It is also the subject and title of James Ellroy's latest novel (Mysterious Press, \$16.95, 325 pp.), brutally direct and heart-wrenchingly developed. Ellroy has created two characters—both cops, both former boxing heroes—whose lives become dangerously entwined, first as combatants, then as squad car partners, then as suitors competing for the same woman. Bucky Blanchard, one of the two, narrates this hardboiled tale. Ellroy has brilliantly poised their story between beauty and gross ugliness, honor and corruption, sense and loyalty, knowledge and ignorance. This is a *big* novel, ambitious in theme and content, and it's the finest of its kind that I've read in many a year.

If you've managed to miss all the attention given to Scott Turow's first novel, **Presumed Innocent** (Farrar, Straus & Giroux, \$18.95, 435 pp.), let me briefly recommend this one to you. Written by a lawyer and centering around a lawyer/protagonist who initially conducts a murder investigation for the district attorney's office, and then finds himself on trial for the crime, *Presumed Innocent* has great behind-the-scenes D.A. stuff while the book's entire second half is given over to a wonderful trial account.

A.A. Milne is best known as the creator of Winnie-the-Pooh. Dell has also reminded us that he penned a single mystery novel, which he wrote, according to the dedication, for his mystery-loving father. The result was **The Red House Mystery** (\$3.50, 239 pp.), and it should please fans of locked-room puzzles that take place in rambling British country manses.

Simon Brett has been profiled in this column, so I'm pleased to see Dell reprinting his mysteries with striking new covers. If you haven't tried Brett, pick up **Cast, In Order of Disappearance** (\$3.50, 182 pp.), and acquaint yourself with Charles Paris, middle-aged British actor who drinks too much, works only when he is forced to, and keeps finding himself in the middle of murder and mayhem. Charles is so human that he's irresistible to lots of ladies, and it's one of these who gets him embroiled in a nasty blackmail scheme involving scandalous sex photos. Following Charles around London and environs provides an intriguing backstage look at show business and those who wield power in the industry. And Charles,

imperfect but honest with himself, makes a comfortable traveling companion.

If you've never read Ross Thomas, **Briarpatch** might be the perfect place to begin (Penguin Books, \$3.95, 370 pp.). This book won the Edgar Award for Best Mystery/Suspense Novel of the Year, and one can certainly see why. From the opening pages, when the protagonist Benjamin Dill loses his younger sister, *Briarpatch* races along. His sister was a detective in the Sun Belt city that was their hometown when a car bomb killed her. Now people are saying she was crooked, and on the take; and Benjamin is shocked to find nothing of the sister he loved in the place she called home. There are layers to this book, and serious themes—loyalty to family, secrets of siblings, the strangeness of going “home”—that add a satisfying dimension to what is also, undeniably, a very fast-paced and suspenseful thriller. Dill, an honest and sympathetic hero, struggles with questions of trust and loyalty and intuition and innocence as the net becomes ever tighter and more threatening. Highly recommended for those of you who like strong, contemporary stories.

Miss Marple fans, take note. There are two recent books that you'll want to acquire. The first is **Miss Marple: The Complete Short Stories** by Agatha Christie (of course). Here in one volume are all twenty of the tales featuring the amateur spinster sleuth from St. Mary Mead. Apparently it's the first time they've been collected in one volume, so this becomes a valuable addition to your Miss Marple library (if you have such a thing). It's published by Dodd, Mead at \$14.95, and is a bargain for 346 pages, I'd say.

The second book for your Marple library is **The Life and Times of Miss Jane Marple** by Anne Hart (an obvious fan!). This purports to be a “biography” of the beloved detective, taking its clues to the subject's life from the novels and stories themselves, as well as from other Christie writings. Hart gives us a guided tour of the village Marple called home, as well as some of the other locales mentioned in the tales; and she chronicles the changes that occurred in the character over the forty years in which she lived in Christie's writings. The book is entertaining and a must for die-hard fans of Miss Jane Marple. It's been attractively designed, too. (Dodd, Mead, \$13.95, 161 pp.)

**Moscow Metal** (Houghton Mifflin, \$15.95, 264 pp.) is Rick Boyer's fourth Doc Adams suspense novel and, as with the earlier books, Doc himself is one of the strongest reasons to pick it up. The New England setting, the relationship Doc shares with his wife

and policeman brother-in-law and several others, and a couple of other well-drawn characters add a lot to a suspenseful tale involving national security, double agents, and a deadly "mole" disguised as a good guy.

Something entirely different is Elizabeth Peters' **Trojan Gold** (Atheneum, \$15.95, 272 pp.), in which heroine and sleuth Vicky Bliss returns in full and riotous splendor. One day she is at her desk in the German museum that employs her as an art historian, looking forward to nothing more adventurous than her usual lunch with the puckish Professor Schmidt, her boss. When she opens her mail, however, she finds a very intriguing photo—intriguing, at least, to an art historian, for one would have to be an expert to recognize that the jewels the strange woman was photographed wearing are none other than some famous gold jewelry that disappeared toward the end of World War II. There are some very serious—deadly serious, in fact—people out to learn more than Vicky, but they do little to dampen the lighthearted air of this book. Certainly they barely crimp Vicky's style, which is a combination of the wry and worldly Nora Charles and the irrepressible Nancy Drew. The gorgeous Alpine background adds that final touch, the topping on a confection of a book.

R.D. Zimmerman's **Blood Russian** pulls the reader into a Hitchcockian suspense story wherein an average guy—in this case, a Russian—suddenly finds himself at the heart of a deadly game in which he is ignorant of all the rules. The tale is taut with tension and twisty, peopled with striking characters and set against a graphically rendered milieu of modern, everyday Russia. It is highly recommended for fans of *Gorky Park* and anyone else who yearns to visit the Soviet Union this year, but hasn't the price of a ticket. (Ballantine, \$3.95, 336 pp.)

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Photo by Lorey Sebastian. © 1987 Orion Pictures Corporation.

Detective Meechum (Brian Dennehy) puts the cuffs on Cleve (James Woods)  
in *Best Seller*.

# MURDER BY DIRECTION

by Peter Shaw



**B**est Seller comes close enough to being a top-notch combination psychological and action thriller to tempt us into delivering a lecture on character motivation. We would start by admiring the plot of *Best Seller*. Dennis Meechum is a burly, tough Los Angeles police detective who, like Joseph Wambaugh in real life, writes best sellers based on his experiences. A professional killer, Cleve, wants Meechum to write a book exposing David Madlock, a big businessman and philanthropist whose millions are based on a series of assassinations of rivals carried out by Cleve. The problem, of course, is that Meechum the cop is more likely to arrest Cleve than Meechum the author is to write up his story—if he can be persuaded to believe it in the first place.

Cleve takes several approaches. He shadows Mee-

chum during a chase and just as Meechum is about to be gunned down, steps in to save his life. Cleve also finds out that Meechum has been unable to write since his wife's death from cancer, which cost him all his money. (We didn't realize that the L. A. police department lacked a major medical plan). Deeply in debt and struggling to support his sixteen-year-old daughter, Meechum is susceptible to the lure of straightening out his life by writing another best seller. But first he has to be convinced that Cleve did the killings and that Madlock was behind them.

To establish the facts, he sets off with Cleve for New York and other points east to retrace the trail of death. And it is just here that *Best Seller* loses its way. The viewer suspects that Meechum is only going along in order to get the goods on Cleve. On the other hand the sly in-



sinuating, often charming killer seems to be getting to him. The movie's producer has compared the situation to the throwing together of two opposite people, one of them a killer, in Hitchcock's *Strangers on a Train*. In that movie the sinister Robert Walker manages to uncover a murderous wish deep in the upstanding Farley Granger's psyche. But what does Cleve uncover in Meechum? Nothing, really. Cleve keeps saying that as cop and criminal the two of them represent opposite sides of a coin, but the movie does nothing to convince us that this is true. Nor do we ever learn how Meechum really feels about Cleve.

If the producer had only consulted us here at Murder by Direction, we could have pointed out that Meechum is attracted by something in Cleve. Here is a killer unsatisfied with the rewards of his profession who he wants to be the hero of a book. Now this is something—respect for literature—that, even though it comes from an unlikely source, would plausibly attract almost any writer. Instead, the movie emphasizes the attraction of exposing Madlock as an example of the evil done by big business. It's hard to imagine Meechum getting excited by this prospect, which

seems to derive not from character but from the producer's own Hollywood-style social conscience. We are supposed to believe, for example, that the ruthless millionaire Madlock is "the history of America incarnate," and that Meechum does eventually write a best seller about him called *Retribution*. But if there is the stuff of a best seller here, it lies in the interplay between Cleve and Meechum.

As Cleve, James Woods refines his role as the cop killer in the movie of Joseph Wambaugh's *The Onion Field*. When Meechum expresses doubt about his ability to kill Madlock if he wished, Cleve chillingly remarks: "Anybody can kill anybody. Even the president. Remember?" In another sequence, as he gets the drop on one Madlock bodyguard after another, he asks them with quiet concern: "What's your name?" He listens attentively to the answer, then expressionlessly blows each of them away. As Meechum, Brian Dennehy again plays the beefy, savvy cop: one look at him and you know what business he's in. Corrupt in *Legal Eagles*, honest in *F/X* (both reviewed in this space), Dennehy is tempted but proves to be honest at the core in *Best Seller*.

# THE STORY THAT WON



The September Mysterious Photograph contest (photo above) was won by Thomas C. Martin of Euclid, Ohio. Honorable mentions go to John Brosnan of Oradell, New Jersey; Marc Iglar of Los Angeles, California; Lesa Neace of Whitesburg, Kentucky; Janette Mohr of Burwell, Nebraska; Lorrie A. S. Basham of Portland, Tennessee; M. Henderson of North Fort Myers, Florida; Alana LaValle of Ocean Springs, Mississippi; Theo Carroll of Redding, Connecticut; Kathryn E. Stevens of Phoenix, Arizona; Ronald Perrone of Cliffside Park, New Jersey; Jo Taylor of Madison, Wisconsin; and Nina Kiriki Hoffman of Eugene, Oregon.

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## SHADOWGATE by Thomas C. Martin

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Ray Jamieson released the consul's parrot. Carefully dismantling the ornate cage, he carried it down the dark winding driveway toward the gate.

The suicide truck, loaded with dynamite, had already left the terrorists' base. That much he had learned from his informant. He had also learned the terrorists' target—the consulate itself. Rock-eting down the mountain pass, the massive truck would reach its highest speed on the last downgrade, then would swing around the last sharp curve, smash through the locked iron gates and into the consulate itself—where the explosive would be detonated.

As security officer, Jamieson had quickly evacuated the building—his first line of defense. The moonless night was his second.

The immense wrought-iron gate was lighted by two huge floodlights, one of which he extinguished, twisting the other on its mount until it illuminated the sheer rock wall adjacent to the gate like a white sheet.

Jamieson could hear the whine of the truck in the mountain pass above as he kicked the parrot cage flat. He set up the bent wreckage of the cage in front of the remaining floodlight just as the darkened truck careened around the curve.

The driver aimed straight at the black-barred grid outlined by the floodlight—and disappeared in a deafening explosion as the truck hit the rock wall at seventy miles per hour.

Jamieson picked up the battered cage and walked back up the driveway toward the consulate. He had a parrot to catch.

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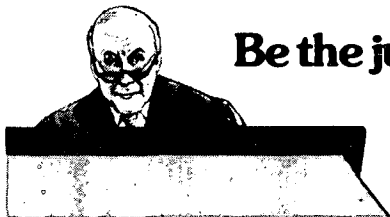
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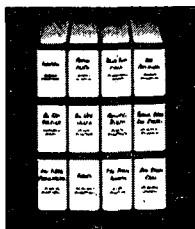
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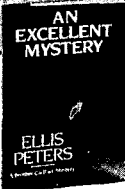
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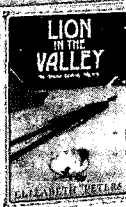
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